STAR WARS

SUPERNATURAL ENCOUNTERS

THE TRIAL & TRANSFORMATION OF ARHUL HEXTROPHON

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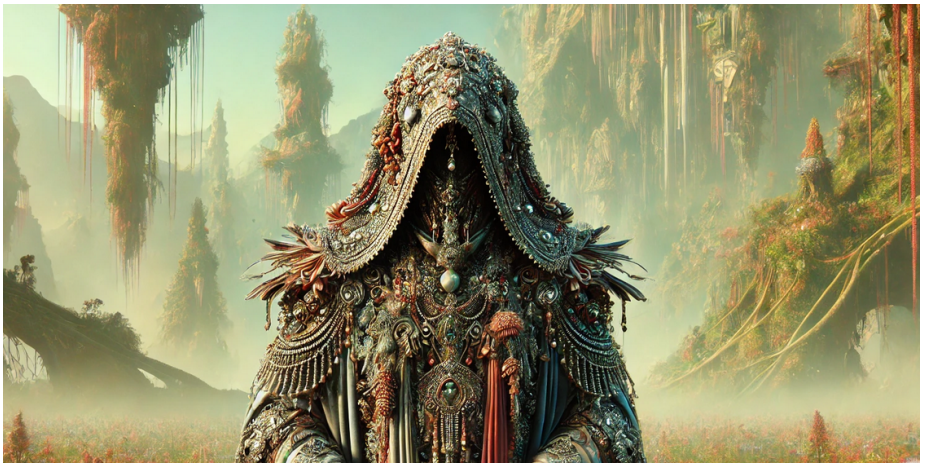
DELUXE THIRD EDITION



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THE TRIAL & TRANSFORMATION OF ARHUL HEXTROPHON

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An encomium those who paved the way for this becoming a reality. No one is an island. No art arises from a vacuum. Upon this foundation was this story built:

Leigh Brackett (1915-1978): The undisputed Queen of Space Opera, Brackett's stories brought complex characters and social commentary to the genre, a skill-set she used for some of Hollywood's greatest screenplays, including the *Star Wars* saga…

Clark Ashton Smith (1893-1961): Through a confluence of genres, and spurred on by H.P. Lovecraft and his wildly imaginative tales of the weird, the Emperor of Dreams conjured vistas of necromantic power and poetic precision, setting the bar for the heights that science-fiction, fantasy, and horror could reach…

Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950): In numerous adventures across the solar system, ERB established lived-in worlds of noble heroes and fierce heroines, strange creatures, alien races, and ancient civilizations… and from these works grew an entire genre.

Edmond Hamilton (1904-1977): With the first lightsabers, hyperdrives, planet-destroying weapons, holograms, and bickering robots, Hamilton, alongside his wife Leigh Brackett, pioneered and shaped space opera, breathing life into *Star Wars*…

C.L. Moore (1911-1987): Adding Sword & Sorcery and the Western into the mix with the wild and weird adventures of Northwest Smith & Jirel of Joiry, Moore set the template for Han Solo and Mara Jade, and, with her husband Henry Kuttner, patterned the future of what the genre would become…

George Lucas (1944): Transforming film history with the *Star Wars* saga, George Lucas vindicated a genre then derided, capturing the imagination of generations of fans, inspiring films, television series, animation, comic-books, novels, video games, and a new wave of writers to expand his universe across all media for five decades.

Alan Dean Foster, Russ Manning, Roy Thomas, Archie Goodwin, Brian Daley, L. Neill Smith, the great ones who started what we now call the Star Wars Expanded Universe…

Rich Handley, for his work on *Cult Encounters* and the EU, and for helping me on this path all those long years ago starting with a local newspaper and another evil empire…

My mom and Richard Terrone for their daily assistance, support, and patience!

To Arthur, Corey, and Kyle, the Three Musketeers of SE, without whom this could not be.

To all of my editors, friends, proofreaders, contributors, supporters (see the acknowl-edgments), and, last but not least, the faithful fans around the world who kept the flame of *Supernatural Encounters* alive and well, turning it into a raging fire…

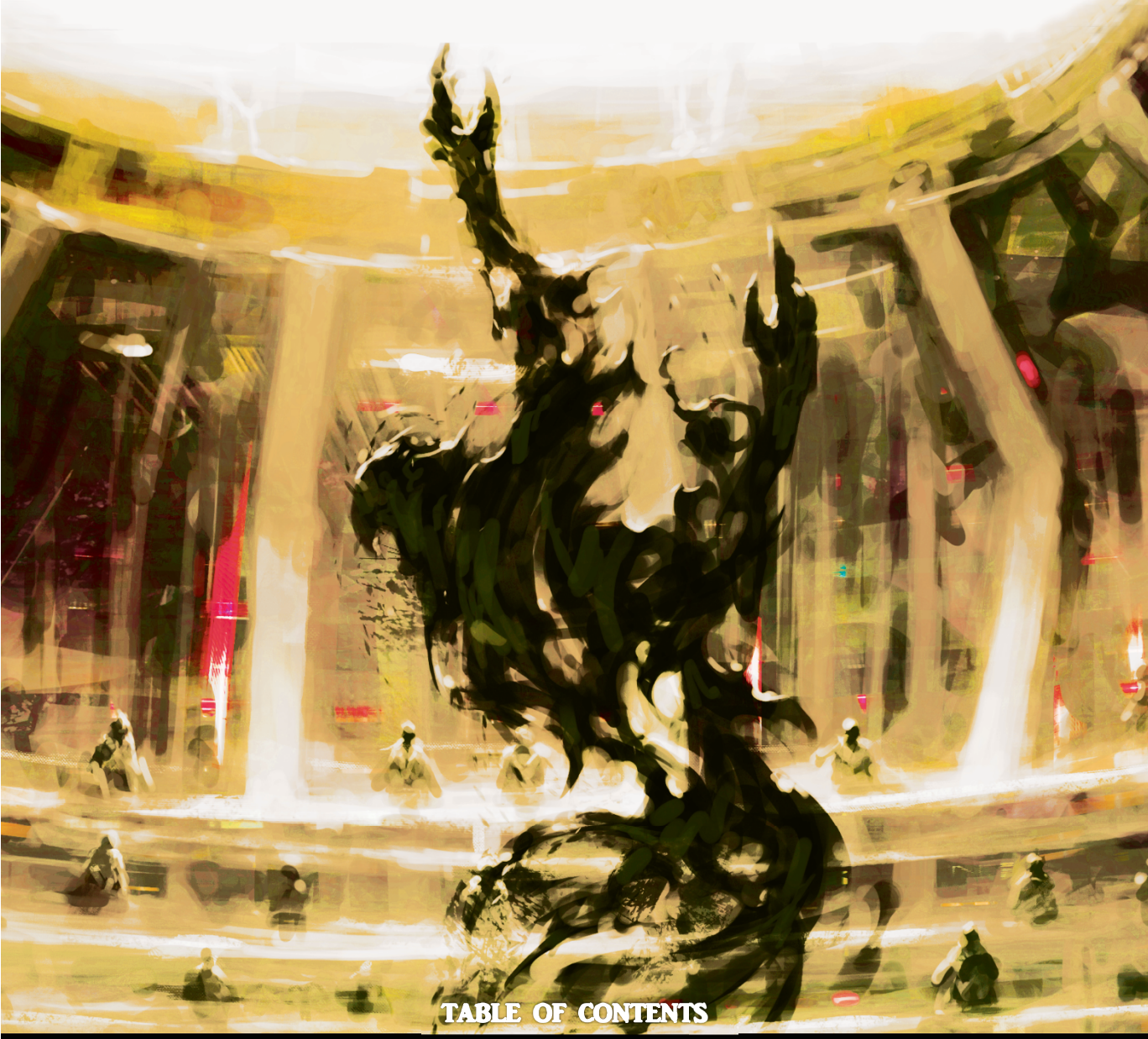


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction to the Expanded Edition 13
Prologue: The Life and Death of a Historian 15
BOOK I: THE TRIAL 21
Chapter 1: Division and Debate 22
Chapter 2: Prelude and Contention 28
Manuscript Reading I 29
Chapter 3: Innocence and Wrath 31
Manuscript Reading II 31
Manuscript Reading III 34
Chpater 4: Fugitives in Space 36
Chapter 5: Secrets of the Keeper 42
Chapter 6: Mistress of Fusai 50
Chapter 7: The Hellhoop 56
Chapter 8: The Testimony of Cindel Towani 59
Manuscript Reading IV 66
BOOK II: JOURNEY INTO OTHERSPACE 69
Chapter 9: The Graveyard 70
Chapter 10: City of the Dead 81
Chapter 11: Dialogue in Darkness 87
Chapter 12: Labyrinth of a Lost Race 93
Chapter 13: Sigils in the Underworld 99
Chapter 14: Tales of the Watcher 104
Chapter 15: Keeper of the Secrets 111

Chapter 16: From the Crypts of Memory 120
Chapter 17: The Horror From Beyond 127
Chapter 18: The Worms Eat Through Space and Time 134
Chapter 19: A Droid's Tale 139
BOOK III: FIRSTBORN OF THE CELESTIALS & THE ARCHITECTS OF MADNESS 148
Chapter 20: Songs of the Eternal 149
Chapter 21: Progeny 154
Of the Elder Races 154
Of Wutzek 155
Chapter 22: Their Cold Sovereignty 159
Of Tilotny 159
Of Horliss-Horliss 161
Of Cold Danda Sine 163
Of Splendid Ap 164
Chapter 23: Shapes of Things to Come 167
The Golden Man and the Metal Stump 167
Strange Roads 169
The Primary Dimension 171
Chapter 24: The First Earthworlds 174
The Mind-Matrix of the Cosmic Clock 174
The Architecture of the Archetype 176
Pandemonium 177
The Charnel Worlds 179
Urthha 180
Terra I 181
Cobol 184
Sol 187
Ravaath 187
Chapter 25: The Second Earthworlds 192
Terra II 192
Corona V 194
Notron 194
An Oratorio of Onrai 197
Cyrannis 199
Chapter 26: Clash of the Zhell and Taung 200
Chapter 27: Era of the Supernaut 204
Shattering Symbiosis 204
The Paradise Propagandists of Pûrgrothiá 212
Chapter 28: The Thing on the Throne 215
Chapter 29: The Ruination of Alashan 219
Chapter 30: The Temptation of Eruthros 223
Chapter 31: Ages of War 227
Sine of the Times 227
The Beast-Folk 227
Changelings 229
Flight of the Star Dragons 233
The Birth of Aerimus 234
Chapter 32: The Eldritch Abyss 236
Spawn of the Architects 236
Procreation of the Wicked 240
Chapter 33: Empire of the Necromancers 245
Synagogue of the Serpent 245
Quiru Mages of the Red Planet 246
War of Dominari 247
The Enigma of Evil 252
Brood of the Witch-Queens 255
The Left-Hand Path 260
Interlude 1: Between the Wildflowers and the Weeds 262
BOOK IV: THE FIRST SHADOW 271
Chapter 34: The Empyrean Wars 272
Bella Siderea 274
Conclave of the Firstborn 277
Chapter 35: The Sundered of Skyriver 280
The Judicious Response 280
Dreamers in the Stars 282
Deceive, Inveigle, Obfuscate 284
Lords of Deception 286
Chapter 36: Thralls of the Endless Night 288
The Prevaricators of Pax 288
The Vanished Moon of Alderaan 290
Starcrow the Wicked 298

Dragon Wars 299
The Shadow Council 302
Enter Atrisia 305
Chapter 37: Sorcerers in Black 308
The Gunningan Guards 308
Forbidden Tomes 310
Secret Wars 311
Chapter 38: Beyond the Doors 314
The Nightmare Machine of the Q'rel 314
The Beast of Q'rul 319
Lords of the Seven Kingdoms 320
Hunters of the Elixir 324
Chapter 39: The Darkening of Skyriver 328
The Triad of Delusion 328
Angels & Demons 332
The Swamp Demon of Somov Rit 337
Chapter 40: Empires of Eternal Void 340
People of the Lie 342
Lost Souls in the Stars Alone 344
The Sharu 346
Chapter 41: Battle Hymns 348
The Pan-Preneur 348
The Winged Races 351
The Revwien and the Parwien 352
The Void of Chopani 355
The Peaceable Wookiees 356
Chapter 42: Galaxy of the Vampires 359
The Silent Voices of Anza'ath 359
The Black Pilgrimage 364
The Blood Spites of Tython 368
Chapter 43: Shadow Kingdoms 370
The Evil Mummy and the Kumumgah Crusaders of Tatooine 370
Wizards of War 376
Chapter 44: Broken Covenants 380
Gathering of the Green 380
The Horror That Came to Yavin 4 387
A Crisis of Conscience 388
Chapter 45: Immortal Gods of the Sith 397
Ravagers of the Light 397
Everlasting Shadows 400
A Mission to Avernus 409
A Legion of Ghosts 409
BOOK V: THE SECOND SHADOW 413
Chapter 46: The War of Temporal Planes 414
Section I: The Wrath of Typhojem 414
Section II: Riders of the Crystal Maelstrom 419
Orax 419
Kedavra 421
Jennoshim 426
Taspan 428
The Dust of the Dead and Bando Gora 431
Carnel and Cornus 433
Chapter 47: Cycles of the Damned 434
Section I: Warriors of the Deep 434
Section II: Diaspora 440
The Caravan of Cyrannis 440
Experiment on Terra I 441
The Call of Cobol 442
Section III: The Veil Folk of Andowyne 443
Fall of the Fates 443
Visions of Paradise 445
The Great Hunt 446
Section IV: The Tempest of Nhar-Zhaggoth 448
Section V: The Great Underground Empire 452
Chapter 48: Behind the Veil 456
The Heart of Seoul 456
Guardians of Infinity 461
The Torment of Typhojem at the Gates Of Dream 463
The Sacrifice 468
Chapter 49: Behold the Queen of Air and Darkness 473
Lost in Time and Space 473

The Technocrats Of Besh 475
Song to the Stars 477
Light the Sky on Fire 478
Interlude II: The Problem of Droid Abuse 480
Chapter 50: Black Science 485
The Melodies of Oblivion 485
From The Nexus of Sominus 488
Chapter 51: Astounding Adventures 493
Islands in Space 493
Nemesis From Urthha 495
Androids of the Elysian Fields 498
Terror on Terra I 499
The Corridor Ghouls of Cobol 501
The Triumphs of Terra II 502
Children Shouldn't Play With Mnggal-Mnggal 504
Chapter 52: Dejarik 507
Chapter 53: Enigma of the Absolute 525
Section I: Destroy the Dark Overlords! 526
Section II: Haunted Stars 528
The Fourth Empire 528
The Tragedy of Terra I 528
Worlds Collide on Corona V 529
To the Earth Another Life is Born 533
Shadows Mourn 537
Section III: Infinite Secrets of the Pelgrin Oracle 538
Chapter 54: Across That Dreary Coast 541
The Sorrow of El'shuddem 541
Eversion of Reversion 548
Sail the Ship of Time 549
Chapter 55: The Fearful Potencies of Night 551
Chapter 56: Scourge of the Suns 558
Chapter 57: Breaking of the Battalions 564
Chapter 58: Horliss-Horliss Throws a Shape 575
Epitaph for an Old One 575
Way of the Wandrella 576
Abaddon Unchained 579
Chapter 59: Seven Seals 583
A Question of Balance 583
Chains of Fire 586
Forbidden Zones & Engines of Defense 588
From Coruscant to Corellia 589
Chapter 60: Hail, Sons of Hender! 594
Section I: Exodus 594
Thx-0001 594
Forhilnor and the Calculating Gods 595
Cosmo and the Hidden Crystal 599
The Seer and the Strange Vision 602
The Eye of Clarity 605
The Cost of Freedom 609
Section II: The Coming of the Concealed Ones 612
BOOK VI: THE THIRD SHADOW 617
Chapter 61: The Twilight Wars 618
Section I: The Gathering Gloom 616
Three Pillars 619
The Deceit of the Rakata 619
Section II: The Verdigris of Decadence 620
Section III: Queen of the Night 624
The New Architect 624
The Secret of the Lost Gate 626
The Supremacy of the Swarm 628
The Crime and Punishment of the Kashi Mer 631
Into the Great Black Nest 633
The Night Herald 636
Chapter 62: Hibernal Tales from the Endor Moon 638
Long Live the Vassal Queen of the Night Spirit 638
Morag Meets the Sentinel of the Snow King 639
Day of the Stranger 641
The Duchess of Sleet 642
Stagorr and the Ice Demons 646
The First Battle of Endor 648
Chapter 63: Strategems of the Spider 654

Section I: Dark Nests & Black Hives 654
Joining the Killiks 655
The Story of Hathkhalid Sud 656
Signals 656
Section II: All the Worlds Will Be Your Enemy 658
Akir 658
Alashan 658
Ankh 660
Anura 661
Arbra 662
Arrakan 664
Aruun 665
Chapter 64: Warriors of Shadow 666
Chapter 65: Farewell to the Gods of Dark Illathurion 674
Danse Macabre 674
The Second Battle of Endor 677
Chapter 66: The Ardor of Outland Suns 682
Chapter 67: The Anguish of the Chosen 695
Section I: Chronicles of the Shadow Wars 695
A Force Demon 696
Deceiver from the Duplicate Dimension 698
Death of a Daritha 699
Section II: Outcasts from the Shadow Worlds 700
Jentawui and the Dreamworld of Aenir 700
The Dark City of the Croke 703
The Sinister Statue of Korman Lao 704
A Vast Cancer Spread by Lies 707
Chapter 68: Belot, Bringer of Chaos 709
Star Forges 709
The Malignant Mystery of Metamura 711
Malevolent Mothers & Deadly Daughters 715
Chapter 69: Dark Kingdoms Divided 722
Section I: Awaken the Guardians 722
Section II: Infinite and Infernal Empires 723
The Black and the Red 723
Rage of the Rakatan Warlord 724
The Despot of Atrisia 727
Out of the Cauldron 727
Into the Fire 728
Section III: Warlords and Despots 730
The Battle of Ten 731
The End of the Cosmic Wars 732
Interlude III: The Stars Will Fall, Then All Will Die 734
Chapter 70: Xendor and the First Great Schism 737
Chapter 71: Dwellers of the Deep 741
The Tale of Protas 741
The Progenitor's Tale 744
Chapter 72: Suzal and the Sorcerers of Rhand 751
Sins of the Father 751
That Old Time Religion 753
Children of the Damned 755
We Are Five 756
The Hallowed Destroyer 761
Enlightened Souls 765
Chapter 73: Kingdom of Nightmare 768
The Yevethan Hegemony 768
The Return of Aerimus 770
The War of Abominatium 771
Apostates of the Great Council 774
Riders in the Void 776
Parricide in the Cremlevian War 778
Chapter 74: Undulations of the Two-Headed Beast 783
The True Sith Empire 783
The Zanibar and the Monster of Medriaas 784
The Goblin Hoard of Alsakan 784
A Magic Trick with Friends 788
A Darth is Born 790
Chapter 75: Eidolon of the Heresiarch Conspiracy 792
A Teacher and a Seer 792
A Snake in the Grass 793
The Second Great Schism 796

The Obelisk of the Ambrian Empress 799
Xoxaan and the Black Legions 802
The Dread Monolith 804
The Heart of Graush 807
The Dawn of Mandalore 808
The Battle of Corbos 809
Chapters 76: Dynasties of the Depraved 811
Exaltation of the Exiles 811
The Qalydon Reckoning 817
The Lure of Black Boxes 822
Chapter 77: Naga Sadow Meets the Materialist Magician 826
The Dissembling Disciple 826
The Zealot of Ziost 829
Restless Natives 830
Eternal Loathing 831
Harbinger of Hate 832
The Haunted Planet of Athiss 833
Chapter 78: Scions of Amnesia 835
Section I: Tales of the Sith 835
The False Freedom of Freedon Nadd 835
The Master's Lair 838
The Old Sith Wars 840
Prodigal Knights 840
The Exile 841
Tenebrae's Trickery 842
The Triumvirate 843
The Verification of Unity 844
Section II: Wars and Rumors of Wars 845
The Extirpation of Darth Vitiate 845
The Paecian Empire 845
Solipsistic Sith 846
Chapter 79: The Tragedy of the Seidhkona 849
Section I: The Strega and the Mind-Witches 849
Captain Eo and the Life-Witch 851
Section II: The Life and Legend of Lord Nyax 853
Chapter 80: Vernal Tales from the Endor Moon 868
The Witch of Endor 868
The Quork and the Mantigrue 869
The Bobog and the Phlog 870
The Jotnar 873
Morag and the God of the Cold White Silence 874
The Tyranny of Mutation 877
To the Devil a Daughter 879
Goodbye to Romance 882
Chapter 81: Autumnal Tales of the Endor Woods 887
The Totem Master 887
Under the Mountain 888
A Prophecy Come to Pass 889
Latara and the Secret Tulpa 890
Malani Meets the Dulok Princess 893
A Warrior and a Wizard 895
Chapter 82: The Kingdom of Dreams 898
Chapter 83: In the Temple of Darkness 910
The Long Journey of the Nightsister 910
The Loremaster of the Shadow Sanctuary 917
Eyes Wide Shut 922
Chapter 84: The Verdict 924
The Testimony of Leia Organa Solo 924
A Droid and His Master 929
Epilogue: Transformation 932
Of Arhul Hextrophon 932
The Truth About Legends 938
Appendices 940
Appendix A: Cult Encounters 941
Appendix B: Excerpt from the Holocron of Lord Shadowspawn 967
Appendix C: The Twelve Great Realms 968
Appendix D: The Infinity Realm of Apeiron 969
Appendix E: Coda: From the Adventures of R2-D2 and C-3PO 985
Appendix F: Atlas 999
Acknowledgments 1048
Infernal Endnotes 1052

STAR WARS

SUPERNATURAL ENCOUNTERS

THE TRIAL & TRANSFORMATION OF ARHUL HEXTROPHON

Over the Spirits of Mortals spread the Mantigrue wings of colossal monsters and all manner of murky things that prey upon the heart and soul and body. Yet it may be, in some far day, the Shadows shall fade and their Dark Father be chained forever in his Abyss. Till then, Mortals can but stand up stoutly to the monsters in their own hearts and without, and with the aid of the Supreme Maker, he may yet triumph.

~*The Teachings of the Dai Bendu*, attributed to Brother Rowade

Introduction to the Expanded Edition

By Mammon Hoole

The controversial manuscript of Arhul Hextrophon, available here for the first time in its complete and corrected form, is one of several that was discovered in his Chandrilan home thirty-six years after the Battle of Yavin. This edition corresponds to the most recent version that Hextrophon prepared, as confirmed by copies of the text transmitted to Q9-X7 and Professor Misqa Tonique, who worked alongside the historian in the final months of his life, and since stored in the databanks of Mistress Mnemos.

The transmission history of Hextrophon's writing is complex. There are three basic periods of composition, with additional editing occurring between these periods. The unavailable, earliest manuscripts of the first period were composed immediately upon Hextrophon's return from the region known as Otherspace—an event that occurred thirty-five years after the Battle of Yavin—and present a lengthier version than the one he next prepared during the second period, in which he removed significant portions in an attempt to make the narrative more palatable to the general public and, undoubtedly, more acceptable to the Historical Council. In the third period, Hextrophon abandoned this cautionary approach entirely and restored the deleted portions—this time with greater refinement and considerable expansion.

This final edition, considered the definitive text by Hextrophon, encompassed not only extensions of previously recorded material, with nomenclature, corrections, and details not present in earlier drafts, but entirely new sections. Additionally, there is substantial rearrangement intended to present events in a more finely delineated, chronological framework. According to Q9, who oversaw most of this work (much of which was based on data he received from an advanced intelligence known as the Watcher), Hextrophon cited the reception of additional information which he incorporated. Of course, the uncanny nature of this and the controversial epilogue became a subject of extensive debate two years later during the now infamous meeting of the Historical Society.

A partial transcript of this private and rather heated meeting, replete with the transcriber's personal thoughts, was included in the initial leaked version of Hextrophon's manuscript, a version derived from a copy obtained from the middle period, which appears to have been stolen from Hextrophon's Chandrilan home and sold privately to an unscrupulous black-market antiquities dealer, from where it went through several hands before it was purchased and made available to the public by renowned adventurer Myk Bidlor.

While Bidlor's dealings with the black-market trade of illicit antiquities has garnered no small controversy unto itself, his motives were based on the belief that—left to the Council's devices—the manuscript would never have seen the light of day. While we do not condone the manner in which it was procured, it should be noted that, given the vitriol the manuscript was met with (due in no small part to significant challenges it

makes to our understanding of cultures, events, and chronology), his fears were not unfounded. Bidlor's efforts helped raise public awareness, providing the foundation for the corrected edition.

This final edition of Hextrophon's text has been judiciously examined, collated, and prepared from the extant available manuscripts by a small team of scholars. These include Doctors Rygel Lawlins, Wes Adod, Trace Piskem, Royce Crater, Aryn Hort Thorn, Raphe Nahys, Obern Wentham, Grigem Etchill, and Watkins Milt. It also includes a complete transcript of the two days of debates by the Historical Society and their guests, as it has become connected to the work itself in the eyes of the public.

As to the question of legitimacy regarding the fantastic conclusion of the Council meeting, later called into question by several scholars who had not been in attendance that day and assumed it was added by a later redactor, presumably a Hextrophon advocate, I can personally attest to its veracity, as can numerous others.

In keeping with Hextrophon's wishes, we have maintained his use of capitalizations and of certain words, for which he left behind the following commentary:

> I have broken with the standard usage of the word *sentience* seen in modern scholarly and non-academic writings in favor of the older and more correct application. *Sentience* properly refers to any creature that can feel. Since it is undeniable that all creatures do to one extent or another, the term properly applies to them. *Sapience*, on the other hand, is the more precise word to refer to beings who can utilize language to reason and speak. The alteration of these words is egregious and not insignificant. Applying *sentience* to the latter group is not only erroneous in Basic but serves to remove animals and droids from the category of beings with the capacity for sensation or feeling, reducing them to nonfeeling *things*, a trend derived from the agendas of those who determined that they were best regarded as commodities to be exploited. Henceforth, I utilize the term *sapient* for beings that employ language and *sentient* for those who cannot.

The publisher of this work has seen fit to enhance Hextrophon's text with illustrations by famed artists Dirc Ch'los and Claudius Gemulo. They are based on Hextrophon's own sketches, most of which were stored in the digital archives of Master Mnemon, with a few later discovered amongst his belongings, including those that grace its covers. A representation of his maps has also been supplied, as have various clippings and footnotes (which his droid insists on calling "hexnotes") that had been scribbled in the margins.

It is our privilege to thank the many supporters of this work. We are also grateful to the readers of the earlier version who championed our efforts to see a proper version published. To this end, we have made this edition available in a variety of formats.

May the Force Be With Us,
Mammon Hoole

[Third Edition note: Thanks to the combined efforts of Mistress Mnemos, Q9, and Dr. Stryton, corrections were made in tandem with newly recovered material from Hextrophon's files to prepare this third and final edition. Any remaining mistakes are solely my own—Hoole].

PROLOGUE

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A HISTORIAN

"For what they have done and continue to do, I see no limit to the horror to which Mankind is heir… Men hovering forever on the brink of secret, abyssal oceans of supernatural terror, severed from the next world by a thin veneer which will soon be rent." ~From *The Journal of Lord Nyax*

Arhul Hextrophon sat alone in his study staring into space, cogitating on the inveterate, ceaseless stream that was time. *How long had this ignescent galaxy been consumed by the dying rage of the mad and monstrous?*

Restless, Arhul arose and went to the large bay windows. The decrescent Chandrilan moon, now dissolving in the pastoral fields of chicory and lyris that grew wild upon the sweet-scented valleys he knew, spurred on his mordant brooding. Its fading light touched briefly on his tawny beard and shaggy hair before vanishing. *Was peace only reserved for those for whom all endeavors ceased, or were the dead embroiled in yet other toils?* He thought upon Mon Mothma and others long departed who had given their lives to ensure that freedom from bondage and fear could be shared by all, a cause he once fervently shared before he started to wonder if it was all naïve idealism. *What purpose did all the suffering and bloodshed serve if to achieve only a few years of peace before another evil arose to take the place of that which they'd fought so bitterly to defeat?*

He opened one of the dark glass bottles sitting atop the cabinet. The impressive collection, from a more fortuitous time, had sat there for years, intended mainly for guests. He knew that even the help of the many decades-old *Segir Reserve* wouldn't push aside his doubts, but he savored the honey-wood, slightly fenneled whiskey as he recalled the words of the Lurmen Chief, Wag Too, who he'd once interviewed, accusing the New Republic of being only slightly less militaristic than the Empire, quoting from the Sylphe King of Sainte-Evanëflore who'd written, "War only feeds the violence, engorging the bloated death-worm that cares nothing for ideologies or sides." That brought to mind the famous quote from *The Challenge of Peace*, written by the Nuiwit Council of Elders, which said, "In war, there is no good and evil, only spilt blood and shattered bones," and the quote from Cody Sunn-Childe, who denounced war as, "The most fervent expression of the Father of Shadows, serving nought but him and those who serve him."

Had the Alliance and its successors actually prolonged war as their most outspoken critics contended? He rejected the notion. The Emperor was evil incarnate. The suffering of the galaxy would have only increased exponentially had his reign been allowed to stand.

The mournful cries of the Silverwing broke through the indigo night, reminding Arhul of a book he'd read of dispossessed younglings in search of paradise. There were, of course, long stretches of peace in the galaxy and worlds that had rarely seen conflict, but that seemed abstract at the moment, a fleeting bit of fortune; their odds of continuing as such was a bet not even the most hardened gambler would take. His own youth, characterized by peace and contentment, had been visited by an act of violence so extreme, it forced him to grow up far quicker than he otherwise would have.

It was that road that led him to early service with the Alliance. He was not a warrior, but rather a man of science and letters, and so he'd made a name for himself as a historian, then archaeologist, then Master Historian before becoming a mentor for two very bright students who he felt were far cleverer than he… and more circumspect.

For most, that would have been enough.

But the appetite for truth doesn't care about accolades, reputation, or comfort. It scorns all such notions as the luxuries they are. Even worse, it seeks to be shared despite the fact that most in the galaxy have little patience for it, and some take pleasure in deriding it.

So be it. If, by his sacrifice, some find some measure of courage, hope, or peace, it would have all been worth it. That had been his objective, after all: to shine a light on the darkness… Only a fool would fail to know the darkness would respond.

Finishing the last glass, he now poured himself a dram of *saqua,* breathed it in, and took a sip, allowing the liquid to rest on his tongue for a few seconds before swallowing. Smokily aromatic and warming, he filled up the tulip-shaped snifter.

As the evening hours drew to a close, his hackles rose as the enervating fears returned, with all the courage he'd felt in the nobility of his fate fleeing before him. Nervously rubbing his thick stubble, he glanced at the enigmatic crystal skull upon his desk: *Why sacrifice so few precious years if nothing awaits beyond the grave but endless seas of black oblivion? If eternal nothingness is the abiding place of the departed, were not the hedonist philosophers right in laughing at all notions of hope and struggle as the province of fools?*

He knew a dolorous end lay in wait just outside the door. Arhul did not imagine himself Force-sensitive, but he didn't have to be. He'd known for some time that his doom was at hand and had tried to prepare for it. Steeling himself against the realization that it had come at last, he forced his focus upon the moon-blanched hills of loosestrife and iris which lay before the scattered gambrel roofs and creeping moss that grew in abundance upon the ornate rails and marble statuary and stood as mythic sentinels for whom the ages held little sway. In this bucolic terrene, amidst the deeper realities of the natural world and what he knew must lie beyond, Arhul strengthened his resolve to overcome the thanatophobic dread, resigning what fate lay before him to the providential hands of the greater Force.

He felt, rather than heard, movement inside the house. *They* had the ability to ambulate silently, so that what little sounds they made were affectations designed to escalate

terror. The door of the study opened laggardly, seemingly of its own accord. He saw nothing beyond the opening lintel but the expanding gloom.

A moment of panic set in when he discerned the silhouettes of several manlike forms standing in the shadows. Such things had never been men; they were *of* shadow, embodiments of old and impossible myths too terrible to be believed. But for the burning glow of their eyes, he'd have seen nothing but the rapidly diminishing light until it was too late and they'd glided through the dark and taken him unawares.

Not many months earlier, he'd have scoffed at the very notion, bound as he'd been to institutional creeds and conventional wisdom. How much easier it had been to believe in a finite universe that one could study and measure—in which the only monsters were the figurative ones, the mentally-shattered, avaricious, and power-mad.

Gathering his wits, he spoke without preamble, "You're too late. That which you seek has already been reproduced and distributed."

The shadows seemed to slide closer. What passed as arms grew outstretched; what appeared as fingers elongated into long, sharp hooks. He could no longer move, though whether from fright or some benumbing power they possessed, he couldn't say. Although frozen in body, his spirit and mind were yet free, and these now went to work, refusing to yield to the engulfing umbra of fear and death.

Those that stood before Arhul were not accustomed to speech, and the voices they emitted were as dry, hollow reeds, whispers extruded from long, underground crypts: "You believe we have come for that which you prize sooo dearly… of that knowledge which only the ancients knew…"

"Well, you didn't come all this way for nothing." He would give them neither the satisfaction of dismay nor the acquiescence of despair.

"Nooo, Arhul Hextrophonnnn… We are the Emissaries of Shadow," spoke another thin, old, derisive voice from behind him. "We exact the penalty of *violation*."

"For whom? Your masters sleep, bound in chains," Arhul charged.

"We serve not Dread Typhojem," said another that stretched out from the right of him, "nor bow to the ossuary kings of Xanthiir and Oozultharoum. The Father of Shadows alone commands us… and he is very much *active*!"

To his left, a penumbral face drew near, taking the shape and voice of his late father. Scowling, it said: "You stall to protect those who would expose the secrets of the Shadow Worlds. They will die tooo, and your own eyes will watch as they wriiithe in agony, knowing *you* are to blame for their suffering, as you were for our deaths!"

The words stung, but he knew their ploys and refused to be baited. He feared less for himself than his friends who he dared not even think of now, lest the Shadow Beings prove able to penetrate his thoughts. Falling back on his curiosity, he puzzled over the bizarre physiognomy of beings that could fluctuate from solid mass to impalpable, ectoplasmic forms. It occurred to him then that neither they nor their masters were all-powerful or all-knowing.

"Yooou think yooou are protecting the truuth; that yoou and your pathetic droid probed the seeecrets of kings and gods… It is weee who allowed yoou to travel our domain, weee who imparted the wisdom of our great masters, and weee who will guide yoou on your final stage. Yoou need only open yourself to usss…"

"Yesss, we know you have suffered in sssolitude. You need not be lonely any longer… We will give you all that you desire…"

"*You*?!" he scoffed. If they could not destroy his work, they would discredit it. They needed only a body. They could not possess one whose mind had not been weakened, whose spirit had not been darkened. But together, they could kill him, drain his blood, and, thereupon, take his corpse as an animated puppet. With his name held in ignominy, none of what he recorded would be regarded as anything but the ravings of a lunatic.

"You," he spat as anger welled up in him, "are *nothing!*" And with this denial of their prize, he sealed his fate.

They fell upon him. Arhul Hextrophon heard the sounds of subsonic shrieking, certain they were being rent from his own throat as death drew near.

Then, the pain stopped.

In the room beyond, another being walked into sight, taller and different in bearing than these others. *Their master?* he wondered. As he approached, however, Arhul realized that he was not a shadow person but a man of indeterminate age dressed somberly in the rich and elegant garb of a century prior. There was something unsettling in his eyes. Unlike the flaming orbs of the elongated Shadow Men, his glowed like the eyeshine of a pittin, luminescent and redolent of things terrifying and remote, as if the gulf of ages were but a transitory passing of seasons. For some reason, he terrified Arhul even more than the Shadow Beings.

As the Shadows turned, hissing and roaring with rage upon the being that entered the room, the being stretched out his arm, causing everything to swirl in black and crimson.

Then Arhul heard nothing more.

BOOK I
THE TRIAL

"The authorities in astronomical chronology made their calculations and announced their expert results. The authorities in pottery took the results of the specialists' computation as a firm base on which to build. Authorities in the history of art, religion, philology, and history in general followed. Difficulties were swept away. Thus there came into existence an elaborate, entrenched system, rooted in fallacy, that bears very little resemblance to the real past."

~*Mortals in Amnesia: Vol VI: The Test of Time*, by Yman Veli'kosyk

CHAPTER ONE

DIVISION AND DEBATE

"What do you mean he was exsanguinated?!" asked Ulm-Aaa-Janzikek of the Historical Council. "Why wasn't this information made public two years ago at the time of his death?"

Janzikek was a reptilian Tiss'shar and one of the rare Isk-ar albinos. Known for his seminal work, *Minds and Perceptions: A Comparative Study of Persuasive Techniques During the Galactic Civil War*, he was also one of the Historical Council's most perspicacious… and *tenacious* members.

"Chandrilan authorities are not accustomed to crimes of that sort," Voren Na'al replied. As Archivist Emeritus of the Historical Society and one of the leading members of the Council, Na'al was to serve as an impartial moderator on the matter of releasing the late Arhul Hextrophon's final work to the public, though many questioned that impartiality. As a younger man, he had been Hextrophon's protégé, and they had remained friends over the years. "That Hextrophon had been a Major, Executive Secretary, and Master Historian for Alliance High Command meant that both Galactic Alliance and Chandrilan security forces were involved. With each wanting a clean field in which to investigate, it was decided to keep the media out for a time. Then came the Swarm War, and we found ourselves facing more immediate concerns."

"This information, while *unpleasant*, changes nothing," Abric Hanapen carped. A long-standing member of the Council, the Velmoc had complained long and loud several times already. "By his own admission, Hextrophon's final years were spent on a ghost hunt, travelling to strange galactic corners in search of fairy tales. There's no telling what enemies he might have made. I see no correlation between the manner of his death and any so-called 'prophetic' component in his writings."

"Then you're blind!" Mungo Baobab spat. "If you've read the journal, as you claim, you'd see that the manner of death is exactly as Hextrophon feared would occur. Or are you purposely trying to obfuscate the facts?"

"Mr. Baobab," cautioned long-time Council member Donn Gulek, Chief Historian of the Kellmer Institute of Galactic History, "I'm certain we don't need to remind you that as an *honorary* member, you were asked here to observe and provide testimony—not lob accusations against *voting* members of the Council."

With the decorum borne from decades in the field of intergalactic art and antiquities, the elderly but still energetic Baobab proferred an apology. His wife, Auren, squeezed his hand and gave him a private smile. She knew that her husband was at that moment kicking himself for having retired from active participation on the Council. It had been a

necessary evil caused by the stress they'd unvaryingly caused. He'd had an easier time on Roon fighting Governor Koong.

Na'al sympathized. For all their purported civility, the Council could behave like wild neks at times and, so far, at least half had bared their fangs. If this was how the Senate debated, it was a wonder anything got accomplished…

Only two hours into the second day of debate, and the Council remained more divided than ever, with neither side making much headway. Everyone was supposed to have read the controversial journal in question, colloquially titled different things by different people. Some called it *The Cosmic Wars of Ancient Skyriver, The Last Days of Arhul Hextrophon*, or *Supernatural Encounters*, but most simply called it "Hextrophon's Manuscript." Na'al surmised that the majority hadn't actually read it and knew of it only by hearsay and whatever sensational or exaggerated reports were told to them by the few that had. Given that the galaxy had become tantalized by the secrets of the mysterious journal, no doubt fueled by the newsnets' charges of "suppression" on the part of the Council, not to mention the recent activity of the Killiks (one of the many ancient races that the document touched on) and the revelation of Hextrophon's murder, it had become a matter that could no longer be ignored or delayed.

The manuscript *could* be released by any one of Hextrophon's supporters, and several publishing houses had expressed interest in distributing it, but given his reputation, that would be a sign of rejection on the part of the Council itself, which would be taken to mean they deemed the work spurious; an ignominious fate for a man who'd been one of the most celebrated members of the Council. On the other hand, the Council could publish it, but any individual member had the right to forego their personal affidavit or the official attestation of their university. This was not uncommon, of course, as historians frequently disagreed, but in this case—with so large a number of members against the work—many would undoubtedly withhold their avouchment and publicly disavow it, which would give the impression that Na'al and his companions were playing favorites and, in effect, render the work spurious.

Perhaps worse was the perception, however true, that the Historical Society was divided and ineffectual; this at a time when the yet tumultuous Galactic Federation of Free Alliances funded them with growing circumspection while ever louder voices urged its privatization. That would prove disastrous. No one had forgotten COMPNOR and the chilling effect that organization had had on knowledge and truth. This would be no different, giving private and corporate backers with personal, political, and financial agendas undue influence over policy and publication decisions.

As if that wasn't going on already, Na'al thought sourly. Various scholars and universities claimed impartiality, but anyone with open eyes knew it was more complicated than that. Academics, like politicians, made speeches about integrity, and yet were no less susceptible to credit chips, power, and prestige than anyone else. Another challenge was the institutional bias that had crept in over the years, creating an environment of homogeneous thought, intellectual conformity, and deference to hierarchical power structures.

"I will never accept as fact a *supernatural* premise for the foundation of sapient life!" Hanapen pontificated dramatically to the resounding approval of his supporters.

"*No one* is asking that you do," responded Tchaka Marshall, Senior Professor of Kalla University, nephew of the famous Roundtree scholar, Rekkon, and a renowned historian in his own right, "merely that you allow others to have the opportunity to decide for themselves whether there is merit in this work. Suppressing his writings is not the way to ensure that everyone goes along with your conclusions."

"The majority of us have already decided," retorted Dee Savyest, the ruffled Head of Research at the Mrlsst Trade and Science Academy. "This is a waste of time!"

"I have to agree," Reina Solov stated in her usual, matter-of-fact way. "I'm not sure I understand why we continue to debate this." Professor of Archaeology at the University of Byblos, and one of the more moderate members of the Council, Solov's specialty was ancient cultures. Unlike Hextrophon, however, she had taken a decidedly drier approach to the subject as she had to most aspects of her life. "The war may have prevented inquiry into this material until now, but if not for the requests of Archivist Emeritus Na'al—and the fact that Hextrophon's name is attached to it—we all know the journal would have been relegated to the *SDs* long before."

The Spurious Directories, or SD files, were repositories for ideas that had been deemed erroneous and included wild assertions, unsupported hypotheses, and disproven theories. Many came from non-members, media figures, fringe academicians, and pseudoscientists, but there were a significant number of older suppositions and conclusions that had once been accepted as fact by historians in the distant past. That the SD files were kept at all was a minor miracle, but the Historical Council of prior years had been more open to alternate possibilities than those in authority today.

Solov had a point, Na'al had to admit, but just *thinking* that felt like betrayal. The fact of the matter was that it was simply *too* bizarre. Historian Palob Godalhi had privately confessed to him that he felt the same way, and if it came down to a vote, as it likely would, he'd have to vote against publication by the Council. It's not that he didn't believe Hextrophon. He believed that *he* believed it. He just couldn't accept his conclusions, meaning that the most rational deduction was that Arhul had been in severe psychological distress over to the nature of his work.

Savyest now tried to appear reasonable. What came across instead was condescension: "Hextrophon was, no doubt, a legend in his time," offered the azure-faced avian, "and a colleague and friend to *many* of us, but we cannot ignore centuries of cultural studies in favor of a fantastic myth replete with a pantheon of gods and demons who present unsubstantiated threats to the galaxy; we have enough *real* problems without resurrecting fables from the distant past."

"*Myths and fables!*" bellowed renowned Senior Anthropologist Mammon Hoole. "I cannot decide whether this body is supercilious or just senseless!" Hoole did not easily become agitated. He held a reputation of being able to maintain an even temper in the face of beasts, younglings, and marauding monsters; but when it came to the intractability of the Council, he found his patience stretched past its breaking point. "Science does

not have *gatekeepers*. It does not shunt aside questions or challenges to the status quo, nor does it rigidly adhere to established ideas if new evidence sheds clearer light on a matter. Our field must be free of dogma. We are not priests proclaiming incontrovertible truths, nor worshipers at the altar of consensus. This scorn for anything outside of the established narrative, which is now a century and a half old, serves only to crush curiosity and stifle inquiry. How soon we've forgotten the many scientific *proofs* that were later found to be in error due to faulty, theoretical foundations or inaccurate interpretations of data. If Hextrophon is seen as a heretic now, well… *good for him!* We should all endeavor to follow his example and question the fundamentals of our understanding! But I see that many of you have no interest in investigating his claims—only dismissing them!"

"If one is going to overthrow the established models," Gulek replied calmly, "then the burden of proof falls on such a person to provide sufficient evidence, and I, for one, don't believe this work does. If *you* want to stake *your* reputation on a weird holothriller with unsupported conjectures, that's your business, but it doesn't make us biased to reject it."

"Except that I *know* all of you," Hoole countered, "and the complacency that has taken over this body. Hextrophon is hardly the first to have asserted 'unsupported conjectures,' or have you already forgotten Doctor Bowen? Assuming he is still held in high regard by the Obroan Institute, then you know he postulated that the Celestials created, and I quote, 'Not just our galaxy, but, indeed, our *entire* universe… They engineered the Hyperspace barrier that surrounds the galaxy, either to protect themselves against invasion or to prevent the return of beings they had exiled. Perhaps both.'"

Hanapen, Savyest, the majority of Lekua University, and most of the members of the Obroan Institute—all staunchly conservative—stirred uncomfortably in their seats at the reminder of Bowen's problematic quote. It hadn't escaped Hoole's notice that a number of them had published or were preparing for publication their own systemizations of Pre-Republic history, which were not only countered but wholly overthrown by the conclusions of the far more well-known, and well-liked, Hextrophon.

"Yes, but he ascribed that group to the Rakata," interjected Professor Roi Tenne from the Obroan Institute, one of the more hyperpartisan members of that body.

"Who were also at one time regarded as a myth!" Hoole countered. "It doesn't matter *who* the Celestials might be identified with as much as the fact that a respected man of science once asserted the idea that they engineered our universe! Hextrophon has simply uncovered an older race that better fits the patterns of evidence."

"Or returned to a discarded view that science has since overturned," Janzikek rejoined over the rising tumult. "And this evidence you speak of presents *your own race* as having been genetically bred as monsters and spies! Really, Hoole, I'm surprised at you."

"Truth must come before foolish pride." Hoole was forced to roar over the noise of the crowd. "And ancestry has nothing to do with anything—or would you condemn the Skywalkers for the blood that flows through their veins?!"

Janzikek snorted at what he considered a cheap shot, but it silenced most, if only for a moment. Hoole was seated alongside his wife, Hectia Ruleth-Hoole. In their section also

sat her best friend, Odon Grimar, a Devaronian geologist, along with several who had personally known Hextrophon or respected him, and a number of younger colleagues who knew him only by reputation. While many of these agreed with his findings because they harmonized with their own discoveries, most did so privately.

Taking advantage of the opening, Hectia stood up from her seat. At just over one and a half meters, she was considerably shorter than her husband but no less fearless. "Look, I may not have a pod in this race like some of you, but I'm a scientist myself and have spent years in your company. All my husband and I are asking is that you keep your minds open and not be afraid to take a stand. This isn't the Empire." Hoole looked proudly at his wife. He had fallen in love with her for her forthrightness and magnanimity of spirit; and when it came to clear matters of right and wrong, she suffered no fools.

Her appeal had been made to those too fearful to speak up. Hectia and Mammon had discussed their frustrations the prior night over a hot cup of ola tea and keela. While some of the newer members chafed at the Council's unyielding rigidity in the face of anything that deviated from traditional thinking, they were also concerned over the repurcussions of honesty. Even some of the older members had grown cautious. That meant that Hextrophon's opponents had the advantage. They could be openly committed to their worldview, as it drew upon the systemic body of work that had been developed over the decades, while those on the other side, fearful of exclusion, would pragmatically wait until a consensus was reached before going along with whatever the majority decided.

"I see this has become open-mic night," groused Hanapen. Hectia rolled her eyes but otherwise ignored him. "You're a *botanist*, not a historian," he continued. "I am not sure you are qualified to speak on these matters."

"Let her speak, Hanapen," Na'al reprimanded. He knew Abric to be curmudgeonly, but never as mean-spirited or ill-mannered as he'd been of late. He wondered if Velmocs went through midlife crises like some Humans did.

"We understand Mammon's position," Janzikek said in a conciliatory tone. "It's *hardly* subtle, though the way you say it *is* far nicer. You could learn a lot from her, Hoole!"

"Don't I know it?!" Hoole bellowed. The attendees laughed, a rare moment of levity.

Inspired by Hoole's anthropological studies, Hectia and her *Valkyrie* team had formed shortly after university. Utilizing Imperial grants, they traveled to undiscovered and newly discovered planets to study their ecosystems in the hopes of conserving them before they were colonized or exploited. They naïvely believe the Empire supported their research out of the same love of knowledge. When they found out otherwise, they stopped accepting grants and turned independent. This proved no easy transition. To fund private research, they started selling interesting or unique natural items—minerals, gems, and plants—after studying and cataloguing them. Tragically, Odon's sister, Lorol, had misguided loyalties and resented the loss of a stable income, arguing that the Imperial Land-Management Programme was within their legal rights to do as they saw fit. When Hird Sohor, their Bothan engineer, announced that she was leaving to join her cousins in the Alliance, and the crew of the *Valkyrie* went off to assist Hoole and the

Arrandas, whom they'd met on one of their excursions, Lorol turned them in. In the fracas that followed, biology illustrator Jippil Fiss was killed, and Odon and Hectia were forced into hiding.

"I won't deny that when Mammon first introduced me to Hextrophon's manuscript, I was taken aback." She'd been part of the discussion the previous day as to whether or not it should be disqualified on the grounds that it wasn't structured in the rigorous way that was customary for academic papers. "I couldn't see how he'd have known the private thoughts and conversations of people who had been dead for aeons…" She got a hearty assent from the opposition. "Graf-Well calls it the 'third-person omniscient narrator,' but I was a bit unnerved by it, thinking, *maybe he had gone a little mad*. But then it occurred to me: what is the most commonly uncovered literary form?" She didn't have to wait long for an answer. Several shouted it. "That's right. Biographies, histories, and *stories*. We are a storytelling people. Right now, on my datapad, I can pull up Darth Maul's journal or Han Solo's for that matter. Take away all the rituals and spells and what are holocrons but journals? We have personal diaries of Anakin Skywalker and the lover of the Despot Queen of Shikaakwa. And we didn't even know of their existence until years after the New Republic was established."

The Emperor's restrictions had prevented the publication of anything outside of Imperial-sanctioned propaganda. This created a backlog of material that libraries around the galaxy could not make public and that had to be kept hidden in case of a surprise Imperial inspection. With the fall of Palpatine, it took decades to catalogue and digitally collate these collections so that they were accessible. Some of this work had already been done in secret, but the rush to release records pertaining to the Clone Wars and rise of the Empire led to several seemingly conflicting accounts that were still being untangled.

"Datapads don't last forever," Tenne pointed out. "Even if we accept that Hextrophon came upon an ancient supercomputer known as the Keeper—"

"He didn't make her up," Hoole countered. "She's the largest repository of knowledge in the galaxy—even greater than Mistress Mnemos. She'd likely have had tens of millions of stories in her databanks."

"That doesn't make them true, and I'm not certain as to why you think it appropriate to lecture us," Savyest griped, never good at reading a room. "You are free to believe in whatever invisible flying monsters you want, but this body's reputation is at stake!"

"You are a most vexing bird, Savyest!" Hoole grumbled. "Is it our reputation that you're worried about? Or your own prestige, grants, and holobook sales?! Times like these make me think we were better off under the Empire. Kept us honest!"

But that only started another uproar.

CHAPTER TWO

PRELUDE AND CONTENTION

Na'al waited for the tumult to settle before diplomatically intervening: "Many of your arguments are centered on the idea that an official release of Hextrophon's treatise will bring scorn upon the Council. I understand your concerns, but I'd postulate that they're unwarranted."

"This is not a mere disagreement," Tem Eliss censured with an upraised tentacle, "as our larger-than-usual attendance demonstrates." Even above Na'al and Hoole, the Iyra sentientologist was the oldest being in the room and the most respected member on the Council. His work on the prodigious *University of Sanbra Guide to Intelligent Life* was unmatched and his integrity unquestioned. "While we can all agree that the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances is *not* the Empire, neither is it the New Republic. We are not quite as *cherished* by this administration as we were under Mon Mothma or Leia Organa Solo, as she herself can testify. These are *leaner* times. After the devastation left from crisis after crisis, the Galactic Federation is desperate for the credits and resources it needs to build a stronger arsenal and military in the event that another mad race of extra-galactic invaders, civil war, or act of aggression by someone possessing a hidden superweapon emerges. The reality is that the Federation is cutting funding and programs wherever it can. I cannot imagine that we are low on that list."

Eliss' speech cut to the heart of the matter. Anything that might cause the Council to be seen as irrelevant was a threat. These were not only lean times; they were precarious ones. The new government had been forged in the fires of war, caught up in the throes of a populace that demanded peace and put their faith in the military to ensure that. Most citizens were far more concerned with the future than the past, which they wanted to forget. No one was quite sure in what direction Chief of State Cal Omas would lead the Galactic Federation, and some feared the worst. There were rumblings of factions within the government demanding the state wield greater sovereignty and put an end to unaligned and independent states that they deemed potential threats to unity and peace; though these were just anxious and unsubstantiated rumors, some knew that a body that felt entitled to seize greater powers would seek to do so while concealing the less *public-friendly* aspects of the truth, and *that* meant that the designated "keepers of the truth" would be regarded as seditious at worst or a security risk at best, both of which would have to be marginalized or eliminated altogether.

"The new Chief of State will likely prove to be a good man," continued Eliss, "as his record and accolades suggest…" What he didn't say was that he might also turn out to be a very bad man. "Most of you are old enough to remember how journalists and historians were treated under Palpatine and his proponents of propaganda—and our

years of struggle, always a hair's breadth away from being imprisoned or killed. It may have kept the profession honest, Hoole, but few would care to return to it."

"Yet, we faced it, Senior Professor Eliss," Leia Organa Solo stood up and declared.

Leia's striking pale-green, silk-satin dress, styled in a fashionable reverse-S curve silhouette, bore a subtle juxtaposition of ivy on soft white. As with her beauty and candor, Leia had grown only more courageous, wise, and elegant with age. "The Council's concerns *are* warranted, but I would caution against allowing fear to dictate any decision you make. This august body still has friends in high places, and not everyone wishes to see the truth sold to the highest bidder. But I, for one, would like to hear the manuscript in question. From what I understand, only a handful have. Surely, we can spend some time allowing it to be read aloud before you pass judgement on it?"

Janzikek smirked in his seat. Baobab grew noticeably discomfited. Hoole smiled and grasped his wife's hand. It was a bold move on the Princess' part, though Na'al knew it was coming. It was a calculated risk. This was Leia Organa Solo: a larger-than-life heroine, luminary and, for many, the most beloved woman in the galaxy. She could provide corroborative testimony to some of the more fantastical aspects of Hextrophon's account. Her support alone would sway many. On the other hand, there were entire sections of the manuscript that would reinforce the opinions of the conservative factions and cause those in the middle to agree that it should be relegated to the SD files.

Na'al had pre-appointed Hari Seldona the honor of reading aloud the early sections of the controversial document, but he made a pretense of picking her seemingly at random. She played her part well enough, feigning surprise and humility. She was a smart choice that would lend an air of gravitas and dignity to Hextrophon's words. That it might also prevent the rabble from interrupting too much was an added benefit.

Hari Seldona was a famed Alderaanian poet who'd started her career in the band Red Line with her boyfriend, Soltan Wostikian. Soltan was targeted by the Empire for fomenting treason and executed. Then came the devastating loss of her family on Alderaan. Devastated, but refusing to yield to tyranny, Hari returned to touring, this time with more subtlety and circumspection when using her lyrics to protest Palpatine's New Order. It was a hard road, and one that nearly cost her her life on more than a few occasions. She'd met Hextrophon a few times during that period, and there had been mutual admiration between them. Reading his work, what constituted his final words, was something she regarded as a privilege. Of course, even the poetess' formidable skills wouldn't sway the stauncher members, but a majority vote was all that was needed.

MANUSCRIPT READING I

"In the years since my retirement as Master Historian, I've been free to pursue enquiries apart from the mandates of government-funded projects. Mon Mothma had seen fit to ensure I had a sufficient stipend to allow me to chase after the more *unusual* subjects that held my interest: ancient Pre-Republic races, lost civilizations, and the unknown origins of sapient life in the universe.

In this particular mission, I must admit to some misgivings and more than a little trepidation on the part of those closest to me, for I've begun to unearth a picture of a far-distant time—a "tapestry of myth" some would call it, but a cosmogony, nonetheless—based on interconnected accounts, cultic lore, and a number of hitherto unexplored, ancient civilizations. Research such as this encroaches on areas of the metaphysical that some consider outside the parameters of the scientist or historian, yet to such sentiments I can only say that just as it is the journalist's duty to uncover present truths, no matter how odd or disagreeable they may be, so too is it the historian's duty to uncover the past, no matter how unfamiliar or unknown the path is.

That is not to suggest that there is not a cost involved. By infringing on the domain of those who've held long-guarded secrets, in probing the immemorial veil of the ages into mysteries unnameable, I have brought upon myself the attention of malefic eyes. Yet, so it must be, for that is the commission: to record and publish the data, to draw together the strands that form the web of truth in this universe, to open a window into the vast gulf of epochs past. I leave it to my readers to look beyond the present, mundane notions of reality and see what the evidence reveals.

Religious extremism has always…"

"If I might make a request," Tem Eliss interrupted gently. "Most of us have conceded to the earlier *Cult Encounters* portion of the document, which was read and discussed yesterday; perhaps we can limit ourselves to the later portions, starting with the introduction to the much larger *Supernatural Encounters* portion of the history he uncovered."

"You'd best say, 'believed he uncovered,'" retorted Janzikek. "It'll take more than *The Uncanny Adventures of Arhul Hextrophon* to convince me the old man wasn't entirely unhinged!" He knew this bit of irreverence would start another debate.

And it did.

Baobab shot up in Hextrophon's defense, followed by famed xenoarchaeologist Corellia Antilles and the iconoclastic Doctor Fem Nu-Ar, who was heard calling Janzikek a "pompous dinosaur!" Hanapen spat and gurgled unintelligibly while Hausen Graf-Well lambasted the "entire assembly of lunatics" and his sycophants nodded and murmured in agreement. The Gektl archaeologist, Dr. Xathan, attempted to calm everyone down as did his Agamarian associates, Doctors Anki Pace and Garv Debble, but the shouting only increased when several young and prominent members of the Obroan Institute began calling the supporting side "*Hextremists*" and "*Hexorcists,*" causing forensic expert Myk Bidlor to laugh heartily, which served only to further the impression many had of him as a fortune-hunter and cad.

As the proceedings spiralled out of control, Na'al stood up and tapped the shoulder of a pointy-domed astromech beside him. Master Mnemon was the nickname of a forest-green and white striped Q9-X7 droid who served as the ambulatory counterpart to the supercomputer, Mistress Mnemos. He'd spent a good deal of time on various errands for her, travelling from Fusai to Coruscant, where the Council had its main facilities. Despite what some would deem an unhealthy obsession with upgrades, Mnemon proved handy in countless ways.

CHAPTER THREE

INNOCENCE AND WRATH

At Na'al's signal, the droid emitted a high-pitched, ear-piercing wail that instantly silenced the surprised and aggrieved chamber. "And stay quiet!" he added when it ceased. A few gasped and some muttered about the impertinence of modern droids, but Na'al thanked him, suppressing a grin. Most organics were still not accustomed to manumitted droids, let alone ones who spoke back. Glaring at the audience, Master Mnemon shook his head in dismay while Na'al motioned for Seldona to continue.

MANUSCRIPT READING II

None can comprehend the primordial phantasies of amorphous minds, incomparable and utterly *alien*. Nor can they fathom the oblique and arcane worlds wherein they inhabit, which—for the one determined and reckless enough to seek out—can be found woven throughout the fathomless gulfs of our senescent galaxy, for there at its center writhe the devourers in darkness, gnawing and twisting in their sunless crypts. It may be that I have been a fool, unwisely shining a light into these putrescent dens of grinning abhorrence, but one must risk much to gain much, and if even a small kernel of the things I've uncovered serves as an impediment against the encroaching, inexorable tide, it will have been worth it all.

Numerous races have asserted that they were the oldest in the galaxy or boasted that they were the first to discover hyperdrive technology and cross the stars. One must search through numerous false claims and distorted facts before arriving at a simple truth: ancient record-keepers were not above racial pride, adding epochs to the chronologies of their peoples to make them appear far more ancient and advanced than they actually were. The Columi, for example, who we have only just begun to surmise are genetically related to the Siniteen, have long boasted an ancestry dating back hundreds of thousands of years. And of those races who are legitimately ancient, scientists have often failed to take into account numbering systems that are quite different than ours. The Killiks, for example, utilize an arcane, sexagesimal dating system, yet we still publish their figures as if they conform to our modern standard of reckoning. Rather than re-examine our mistakes and correct them, we cling to them as if sacrosanct, embedded as they are in our history books, so that decade after decade new errors are piled on top of old.

Reluctantly—and without bias—I would say that it's probably unwise to put great stock in the official records of Hutts, Rakata, Sith, Sharu, Columi, or Bith, nor even

our own modern records, which *still* lean towards what Lost Jedi Master Bo-Jaccan of Órgonon called 'anthropocentric caricature and ignorance.'[1]

Historians from the Old Republic to today have put forth or reiterated dates that are imprecise at best and grossly erroneous at worst, c.f. the planet Jerrilek and research from the xenobiologists of Goroth Prime and the Tyberious Institute of Xenobiology—well-meaning individuals, I'm sure, but from whom I wouldn't trust the time of day, let alone of aeons past. For this and other reasons which will become clear later, I've refrained from listing dates lest I fall into the same trap as those before me. I know the omissions will prove anathema to my colleagues, but the events are of more consequence. I'll merely assert that life in this galaxy started far later than most chronologies traditionally indicate—around the time the earliest written records began—and that the evidence for this will, in time, bear itself out."

Angry grumblings and rude sounds broke out in the room, with Na'al and Godalhi attempting in vain to silence them. Tem Eliss alone succeeded. "Enough!" he shouted, angrily waving three of his tentacles until he had silence at last. With one appendage yet outstretched and arcing to encompass the gallery, he said, "Suffice it to say that Arhul believed there is a time dilation within our dimension—as he comes to refer to it—which renders all numbers relative, since a thousand years in one can equate to a hundred in another." Eliss kept his tentacle raised to forestall further interruptions. "We've uncovered some charts amongst his files. In my assessment, it was wise of him to leave out dates, knowing that his revised chronology would prove a stumbling block to many of us here. Nonetheless, he makes a valid point about largely unsubstantiated dates which we and our predecessors accepted at face value without sufficient verification. Thus, we will suspend further discussion on the matter. There are far more controversial statements ahead, and if we allow every one of them to erupt into a debate, we'll be arguing 'til Coruscant Prime goes nova and Hesperidium freezes over!'"

"You are *surely not* suggesting that you agree with him?" charged Hanapen. "Even if he left the numbers vague, a late-date chronology is clearly implied from the text. Such ideas have no basis in science!"

"Abric, your truculence is not appreciated!" retorted Eliss testily, one tentacle on either side of his body bent as if they were Human hands resting on hips, a gesture he almost certainly picked up from years of Human interaction. "I did not say I *agreed* with him. But since you brought it up, the Council has approved published figures of one million years for the extinct Jerrilek civilization and five billion years for life on Goroth

[1] For further reference, see Bo-Jaccan Órgonon's sentiological studies in *Gamorrese Kinship Algebra*, *Traditional Chevin Medicine and its Transmission*, *Toydarian Scripture*, *Dathomiri Animism*, *The Xa Fel Ecological Crisis: And the Ithorian Response*, *Gungan Linguistics: Pre-Gung Slab*, *Trandoshan Hunting Rituals*, *Hutt Cosmology*, and his expansive work, *Species Without History*. Although his volumes on the Force were considered heretical by the Jedi Order of old, the reason his "sentiological studies" are not included in most curricula is because they vindicated the cultures in question at a time when the body of conventional textbooks regarding them were either condescending or factually inaccurate.

Prime—which we all know are impossible to validate, and yet I do not recall any of you raising so much as a chirp over those dates!"

"On this point, at least, Hextrophon and I agree," acknowledged Janzikek, much to the irritation of several in his section. "We need not remind this body that the established dates of the Clone Wars were off by sixteen years in most of our published texts, not to mention that there is still disagreement regarding the order of events. If we are unable to correctly ascertain relatively recent dates, it strikes me as absurd that we should be dogmatic about ancient ones!"

His statement raised an uncomfortable murmur. It was a sore subject, and the side Janzikek represented was not pleased that he'd brought it up. Historians like mysteries only so far as they can solve them. And since many were by nature pedagogues and pedants, obsessed with imposing order even when none could be ascertained, they were often too quick to make predictions that proved erroneous and attach dates to events for which there was only flimsy evidence. Most acknowledged that a revised chronology was overdue, but Hextrophon's suggestion that many ancient dates were not just unknown but intrinsically unknowable made it all the more risible to them.

Before different factions could start pointing fingers at each other, Voren Na'al gave them the reassurance that he knew would placate them. "Several of us have begun work on a revised chronology that will more accurately harmonize events and down-date millennia to account for so-called 'dark ages' in the reckoning of various civilizations' histories. Since we cannot at this time delve into the veracity of claims to various dates, let alone ascertain the nature of time dilations in pocket dimensions, I agree with Eliss that we table this discussion until we've made further assessments of the subject." As many on the Council had begun to prepare their own systematic annals of history that they wished to bring to the table for consensus and debate, this speech settled the matter for the time.

"May I say something?" asked a somber, smartly-dressed middle-aged woman, projecting her voice from where she now stood in the back of the hall. Her short sable hair and trim figure were offset by hard eyes and a scowl. Audible groans could be heard from certain sectors, which she had expected and ignored.

"Of course, Meela," acknowledged Eliss congenially.

Professor Meela Stryton lived and taught on Tuulab in the Triitus System. Formerly a Human colony, it became a mixed-species city that was yet notorious for its anarcho-pacifist ideology. Stryton had taken over the palace that once belonged to Corva Sector's Gotal crime lord, Mahk'khar, after he was killed and his underlings arrested, and converted it into what was considered by some the most prestigious university in the Outer Rim. Despite the great good the teachers did in a region once controlled by the Empire and the Kaarenth Dissension, there were still many who were openly disdainful of the school for its culture and political leanings.

"I've not said much before," she started as soon as one of the microphone droids reached her, "and I won't speak again after I've finished. My name is Professor Meela Stryton. Some of you knew my late father, Oron. For those of you who don't, he was a respected scholar and professor until his death on Delari Prime. With the help of my mother, Myra, he spent years compiling a master database of all the ancient cultures,

texts, and lost civilizations he'd studied throughout his adult life. He gave a copy of that database to Arhul Hextrophon, a copy that was not found amongst his effects following his death. I then personally handed a second copy to Abric Hanapen, who assured me that he would see it distributed amongst you…"

"That is a lie!" Hanapen roared, practically leaping from his seat. "She promised it, true, but she never delivered it to me! One cannot trust anarchists!"

"Settle down!" ordered Na'al.

"Believe what you will," she continued, keeping her anger in check, "but that is not what I've come here to say." She spoke to the Council as she would to her students and was not about to go tit-for-tat with someone she now concluded was a liar. "It was not the only copy." She waited for the chatter to die down. "I retained a copy, of course. I'd have been a fool not to. It remains… *safe*. I bring this up to tell you that it confirms the main thrust of Hextrophon's argument, including his revised chronology. Hextrophon's methodology could not have been more different from my father's, but the two arrived at the same conclusions… That's all I came to say."

"Have you a copy to provide us today?" Eliss asked.

"That's a funny thing…" she said. When Eliss asked what was so funny, she continued. "My father always told me that if he handed the database over to the Council, it would end up in the Spurious Directories. I didn't believe him then. I do now. This was his life's work. It deserves better. When you've convinced me that this body is receptive to ideas that challenge your intransigent views, I'll let you have the database along with all the substantiating materials my father compiled over the years. Until such a time, I have nothing further to say on the subject." With that, she sat back down and could not be induced to elaborate any further, much to the frustration of Na'al and several others.

An awkward silence ensued until Eliss lifted a tentacle. "I knew Oron well. He would be proud of you." That elicited a small smile from her. "I suggest that until we can meet Meela's requirements, we all agree to move on! Mistress Seldona, please continue."

MANUSCRIPT READING III

"At last, after years of searching, I found the key to the ancient galactic cosmogony. From it came all the mythologies that had been borne upon the winds of the vanished first races, distorted in the decadence of the later civilizations that arose. At first, only fragments of the elusive truth emerged, but as I followed the trail of the ancient Firstborn, the pieces led me from one clue to another towards the ultimate revelation.

I deciphered the pictographs of the Alashan in the City of Forever; in the far-off Phosphura Nebula I heard the whispers of the Kalai on Zirtran's Anchor; I climbed the steps of the Temple of the Elders and entered the Hexagonal Chamber of the Pelgrin Oracle; I plumbed the Codex of the Precursors and witnessed the achromatic fugue in the Empyrean Wars. And in the dank cellars of the Threllan Church of Mimban, Pomojema revealed his true name ere the Gates were flung open and obliterated in the War of Temporal Planes when the hideous brood of Ooradryl roamed the gulfs with outstretched, unyielding arms to the planets and moons shrivelling into fire and dust…"

"*Come now!*" interrupted Hanapen, who would not be silenced. "*This is poetry, not science.* It's Hextrophon channeling Bleys Harand. Are we supposed to accept this as the credible writings of a historian? Is *this* what you want us to release to the public?!"

"I agree. It's not possible for Hextrophon to have visited all these sites," voiced Roi Tenne of the Obroan Institute. "The Pelgrin Oracle has lain in ruin for seventy years!"

"It is an *oracle*, Tenne," Hoole countered, "and thereby supernatural in nature. Who of us can really say what is possible?" Hoole then turned himself into a reptilian Chubbit, a fierce Lepi, an insectoid Sikurdian, and a shaggy Gigoran. The newer members blanched and exclaimed aloud, while several of the senior members rolled their eyes at what they saw as cheap theatrics from the Shi'ido shapeshifter. Most in the room chuckled. "There are many—in this day and age—who still think it *impossible* for my kind to exist outside of the holovids. Plenty who've thought the Force *impossible* and, odd as it sounds, quite a few who assumed the many escapades of Han Solo and the Skywalkers after the Battle of Yavin *impossible*! Let not the cynical arrogance of youth get the better of us. Let us rather say that more things are possible than we might assume."

Hoole could be an imposing figure of a man (when he chose that form) who few could interrupt when he was on a roll. Hausen Graf-Well, however, managed to.

A Muun, Graf-Well was of the modern breed of researchers that had been wheedling their way into the Historical Society. "This section is clear evidence of a later interpolation. The writing style is completely altered in the introduction as it is in the dubious epilogue—an indication that these sections had to have been composed by hands other than Hextrophon's. Such doggerel from Dusk or Heavy Isotope musicians might be expected, but not from the man known as *The Historian*! Following this train of thought, I submit that the manuscript bears out at least four distinct contributors. The first: *W* – the Wutzist, is the oldest. Concerned with narratives, this source attributes Human-like qualities to supernatural entities; *T* – the Tilotnist, sides with the Architects' perspective and is more eloquent in style; *C* – the Celestialist, takes a cosmic approach to history and chronological time; finally, *H* – the Horlist, is preoccupied with the central conflict of the myth-cycle and its malevolent, merciless supernatural villains. My hypothesis will be better expounded on in a series of books my colleagues and I are writing…"

"Graf-Well, we discussed your ideas *at length* yesterday," sighed the Atrisian military historian, Chen Ming-di, famous for his work, *Imperial Atrocities and Other Noble Pursuits,* which detailed the Empire's early history of brutality in places like Telfrey, Bellassa, Dalron Five, Rhador, Gholondreine-β, Ferrix, and Lothal. "The introduction and other sections were obviously composed later. We can't assume discrepancies, contradictions, and source divisions when the evidence and context speak for themselves. In regard to its style, I have employed various writing styles which change depending on my state of mind, intended audience, and mood. Yet, despite any editorial alterations or interpolations, I remain the author of the works that bear my name."

"Unfortunately, Hextrophon is not here to confirm that," Graf-Well pointed out. He was about to press the point when an ominous look from Eliss caused him to *hrmph* and sit. His adherents *hrmphed* and sat along with him, and the room grew quiet again, allowing Seldona to pick up the account where she left off.

CHAPTER FOUR

FUGITIVES IN SPACE

I am not blind to the fact that many of my colleagues who read this will scoff. And while many have respect for me, I was certainly not loved by all—a reality of public life to be expected. This dissertation is not a scientific paper and I have not bothered to couch it in the obfuscating style common to formal academic works replete with incomprehensible jargon that often disguise poorly thought-out hypotheses. I do this not in any act of censure against the establishment I'd long worked in and esteemed, but because the time is short and my purpose for this work is not for it to be dissected and debated amongst my colleagues, *though undoubtedly it will*, but to speak to the average being in the galaxy for whom the light of truth, which so often seems elusive and far away, might perhaps better be seen.

To be a historian is to have an idealistic fascination with the past, even as we recognize that it was far from ideal. We are motivated not by prestige, but by the need to sate a hunger for a bygone age, to glimpse the peoples, places, and events that are no more, to uncover the mysteries they left behind. Yet hunger alone is not sufficient. We must also possess the humility to recognize when we are wrong and the honesty to follow the truth no matter where it leads.

For in resurrecting the past—in all its grotesque glory and shame—we are given the opportunity to grow; in learning the lessons taught by the noble and the vile, we gain discernment between the abhorrent things to be left in the dust and the beneficent things to be restored and cherished again; and so we make a better future.

My fascination with the ancient past began in my youth, and for years it slept in the embers until it was rekindled with the incident on Alashan. That was when the first clue revealed itself to me.

Decades back, a company of archaeologists and historians probing the artifacts of a vanished civilization in the City of Forever, on the ancient world of Alashan, mysteriously disappeared. It was later learned that they'd been ruthlessly hunted down and killed, but by who or what, none knew. The truth wasn't discovered until a team led by Luke Skywalker, Leia Organa, and Mici Shabandar came to Alashan and were confronted by the killer, a powerful custodial intelligence left behind by the Alashanians to ensure their secrets remained secret.

Thanks to her recordings and translations of some of the interior glyphs found upon the walls of numerous structures in the city, Leia—a student of Pre-Republic history under the late Professor Arn Horada—was able to provide an invaluable key that allowed us to decipher the Alashanian tongue.

Alashan means both "People of the Wing" and "Foremost Ones," and a depiction of the unfamiliar-looking reptilian race was found centered and raised above several

others, which I believe are offspring races (one of which could be identified as the S'kytri of Skye) being sent out to battle. Other hieroglyphics indicated a terrible calamity, followed by a victory in war, and, finally, a mass withdrawal from galactic affairs; this occurred in the midst of the Cosmic Wars, an unknown event in the ancient past in which other races were said to have fled, disappeared, or become extinct: the Ahra Naffi, the Arbrans, the Eellayin, the Indur, the Osserians, the Killiks, the Kwa, the Cocytans, the original inhabitants of Yavin, and more.

What nameless threat could have caused such a mass exodus on the part of races known to be so advanced? Some have made a case for the Rakata, but not only are the dates unequivocally off, but the records show that despite the boasts of Rakatan chroniclers, they were but a client race, one of several in league with a greater evil.[2]

The pictographs were only part of the clue. What few asked was how it was possible for Leia to have been able to decrypt unknown glyphs during her brief exploration of the Alashanian city. As brilliant as our former Chief of State is and as knowledgeable as Professor Horada was, this should have struck everyone as implausible. Ancient writings from cultures that are no longer extant and which no one has previously explored can take decades to decode with teams of university scholars working on them. There are but two possible ways Leia could have accomplished this. One is if there had been a pre-existing key to the pictographs shown alongside other languages. Leia has verified that this was not the case while confirming the other conclusion: they were alike to the writings of another ancient civilization, one that she had previously studied.

That this wasn't earlier ascertained is due to a built-in creed that dictates that prior to the discovery of Hyperspace travel, ancient civilizations evolved independently of one another. Scholars don't see the connections because they don't look for them. Additionally, the specialties are compartmentalized. Those who study Killik writings *only* study Killik writings and not writings from the Ahra Naffi or Eellayin. And even if similarities are discerned, they are deemed late-date writings and, despite all evidence to the contrary, are dismissed as the product of cultural cross-contamination. Thus, many ancient Pre-Republic artifacts are mislabeled as coming from the post-hyperdrive era.

But the error of this approach had been laid bare. Leia could decipher pictographs from a lost pre-Hyperspace race because they were analogous to the written language of the Kwa. Whatever embarrassment the scientific community might have felt over this inconvenient truth aught to have been mitigated by the greater light the discovery has shed: the existence of a shared common language amongst ancient races.

This discovery came three decades ago, and there still has not been a major overhaul of our historical texts or even a discussion of its implications. It has simply been

[2] My reluctance to list dates does not mean that I believe *all* ancient dates are in error. Discernment is needed. The integrity of the ancient record-keepers must first be ascertained along with the commonly employed bibliographical, external, and internal tests. Then can we more safely consider such dates as correct—assuming, of course, that the records have been properly translated and understood.

ignored. The reason for this is disappointing if not unsurprising: a linguistic connection between extant races argues against the excessively ancient dates accepted by most. As linguists and philologists will verify, language in any civilization will change significantly from that of its forebears over a period of 5,000 years. Even in a culture diligent to preserve its ancestral tongue, 100,000 years would render it wholly unrecognizable.

The belief in the commonality of a shared ancient language is not new, nor is belief in the necessity of having to alter the chronology of galactic civilization, though such views were only ever postulated by a few historiographers, tracing back to Yman Veli'kosyk and Rol Aviid, whose works proved popular with the public and yet were tucked away in the Spurious Directories, likely for this very reason. No one wants the onerous task of having to revise the ancient models or acknowledge that suppressed works might have been right after all. While I'm heartened to note that in recent years, Aviid and Veli'kosyk's works have become a subject of serious inquiry by the Society for Intergalactic Studies, such monumental reexaminations of accepted data and methodologies should be a much bigger deal than they are.

Thankfully, Professor Horada had agreed with some of their findings as well as the idea that the long-vanished Kwa held secrets to the origins of the galaxy. Scientists had long studied the remains of Kwa Star Temples, though more for their technology than their history. But with the knowledge of their linguistic correlation to the Alashan glyphs and, as we discovered, Zeffonian tombs and cuneal writings of other ancient races, there now existed a lead to the past.

But a century of rigidity towards tenets seen as infallible, coupled with a laggard and even resentful response to the idea of change, meant that I would need a lot more to convince the majority to even consider a discussion of the matter. If their movement was plodding, mine had to be swift. From the records on the Great Library of Ropagu I confirmed that by means of their Infinity Gates—portals which they had built some time in lost ages—the Kwa had established connections to numerous other races. Like them, the most ancient of these had been known as by several titles, such as the Firstborn, First Ones, Precursors, Ancients, and Elder Races. Of these affiliations, we learned of a rival to the Kwa who still existed: the Gree.

The Gree are an obscure race of six-limbed cephalopods who generally avoid the galaxy at large. I came to them alone on Asation, the first planet of the Gree Enclave.[3] From there I rode within one of their age-old city-ships to meet with the Guild Council by the standing arches of Satikan; these were their ancient and mysterious Hypergates, and but a few remained, having been preserved in honor of the galactic bond in the age of Vernal Splendour, their wondrous secrets now forgotten, for the elders of old would not pass them on.

So as not to hit the same roadblock others before me had, I came prepared.

The Guild were more willing to provide me assistance once I procured for them the Khoz'zhak, an artifact of great antiquity that had been stolen decades earlier by my

[3] The word *Asation* exists in the same root language group of the Kwa and Alashan and means "Preeminence" and "Sanctuary." The word Gree itself means "People of Goodwill."

friend, Corellia Antilles. Not wishing to start any clan wars, I wisely omitted that information when mentioning how I'd acquired it. The Te Hasan branch of the Gree had initially retrieved it from Antilles, but they had covertly traded it back to her without the other branches' knowledge in exchange for unlocking the ancient technological device, willing to pay her for any others she might be able to decrypt.[4]

From Satikan I was sent on another ship to Te Hasa, where I would be granted access to the Great Library of Manuals. Although considered a civilization in decline, the grandeur of this Firstborn race was everywhere on display, from the magnificent marvels of their lumbering city-ships to the stunning, scalloped structures, gravity-defying architecture, and visionary cities wherein fantastical, bio-engineered beings ambled about, guarding their treasures. I could have spent years in the Gree Enclave. Here was a race whose primary concern was the acquisition of knowledge and peace, and it was these qualities that made the Gree Enclave feel so intoxicating.

On Te Hasa, the Textmasters gave me a tour of the Halls of the Most Ancient and Forgotten Days. After some weeks of research, it became clear that they were aptly named and why the Gree made pilgrimages to this city. For reasons that were not then understood by me, their forefathers had obscured much of their past, coding it within numerous and now inoperable technological wonders and dense ciphers.

Notwithstanding, there were *some* things I was able to glean, including an early record of the Gree's prolonged conflict with the ancient Kwa, a conflict that stemmed from their construction of the Infinity Gates.

It was once assumed that the Gree's Hypergates were similar to the Kwa's Infinity Gates, but we've since learned that each operated on different principles. For some reason, the Gree saw the Kwa's Infinity Gates as an abomination and ended their friendship with them.

I was hardly the first historian allowed to examine the Halls, but prior ones had assumed religious bias or nationalistic jealousy on the part of the Gree and concluded that there was no need for further inquiry, but there was clearly more to this story than met the eye. And so I asked the Keepers of Artifacts, Ortak'k, if there were other races the Gree had ended their association with. They said there were several. When I asked them if they were the figures in the Khoz'zhak and other artifacts in the Halls of the Most Ancient and Forgotten Days, they acknowledged that they were.

Khoz'zhak means "the belligerent wanderers" and is one of several of the Accursed Tablets that, when accessed, reveals details of the condemned races and their crimes. They were intended to serve as a reminder to later generations but also a warning to avoid committing the same sins.

Thanks to Antilles, I could "open" the Khoz'zhak and show them the holographic three-dimensional figures that emerged. Although the language was indecipherable, even to the Gree, and unconnected to the lingua franca used by them and others, when I asked Ortak'k who the figures were, he readily replied: "It does not take a Textmaster to tell you that they are the Kwa, Siniteen, Sharu, Arbrans, Eruthros, and

[4] They first heard of her skill in these matters from the popular holoseries, *The Corellia Antilles Files*.

Duinuogwuin… Though much of our ancient writings cannot at this time be deciphered, these figures and their sigils have long been known to us, for we are forbidden from trading or partaking in a meal with them. Our people are not as strict on these matter nowadays, for these are very old edicts and pertain to old times, but there are some amongst us who abide by them still."

Once again, prior historians—assuming that pre-hyperdrive civilizations had evolved independently in their own isolated pockets in space—determined the various figures present on Gree artifacts were mythological monsters or gods. "If this was common knowledge, why had you not corrected the prior researchers?" I asked.

"They had not asked us to confirm or deny their findings," the Keeper replied. "Nor would they have listened anyway, as we discovered when we attempted to provide correction and clarification on other matters."

"Let me guess, you were met with a polite but impatient dismissal."

"That is correct. You know your kind well, Arhul Hextrophon."

"Do you know how to locate the Duinuogwuin Star Dragons?"

"We do not," Ortak'k acknowledged, "but it is known that they have made themselves scarce in the galaxy. So too is it known that the Siniteen take a dim view of anyone digging into their past."

"Do you know who the Eruthros are?"

Here, Ortak'k hesitated, "I am afraid that is also a mystery to us. Nor is it in our nature to speculate upon matters for which we are uncertain."

"I understand," I replied, not wishing to cause my gracious host to feel awkward. "Well, with the Kwa and Arbrans having vanished, I guess that leaves the Sharu…"

"We wish you the best, Arhul Hextrophon. You are not the first *grey secant* to have traveled to our shores, but you are one of the few favored. Perhaps when you have found the colors and shapes you are seeking, you will return here and grace us with your knowledge, though you are welcome to the Te Hasan any time, regardless of whether or not you succeed in your quest.".

"Nothing would please me more," I replied sincerely, knowing such a courtesy was rarely extended. "Once my notes have been edited, I'll personally bring you a copy."

And so I returned to Asation and my ship and plotted a course to the Rafa system, a curiously named place as I was later to discover.

Historians the galaxy over remain in debt to the famed gambler and entrepreneur, Lando Calrissian, for having awakened the Sharu by means of the enigmatic Mindharp. Unfortunately, once the Sharu stirred, the Rafa system became overrun with scientists and researchers. The Obroan Institute alone sent five hundred to probe their culture, invade their ancient dwellings, and disrupt their lives. To no great surprise, the Sharu resented the intrusion and feigned a kind of amnesia, leaving only the hieroglyphs etched in the walls of their mysterious structures for the researchers to try and crack. Eventually they were forced to depart with little more than their speculations. I must say that without the aid of my droid, Cuenyne, I wouldn't have gotten much further myself, but we ended up with more valuable insight in mere days than the Obroan Institute had garnered in a year.

It was apparent that the Sharu were either terrible record-keepers or prone to contradiction and wild exaggeration. Their writings, which we could now better decrypt, contained discontinuity, inconsistent dates, and confusion over the identity of their ancient enemy. But the degree of inaccuracy seemed capricious, as if intended to throw off those who would dare to pry. If so, it was a rather ingenious way to guard their secrets. But why go to such lengths?

Through conversation with members of the Sharu priesthood who served as their annalists, we began to get a slightly different picture of the ancient world than their writings indicated. The Sharu, we were informed, *fearfully* guarded their past, and it was for this reason that we were asked to delve no further. Thanks to an anonymous source sympathetic to our plight, we were given a contact and a destination: Kar'a'katok.

Kar'a'katok is an uncanny world, primal and haunted by the specter of a genius loci from its sinister past. Even I, blind as I was by the dogma of materialism, could feel it gloating contemptuously from its plethoric pyramids, vertiginous ziggurats, and exotic temples dedicated to ominous personages in immemorial times. The world had a different name then, its meaning one I could not parse. It was there that I first came upon the accursed sigil that would forever madden my dreams and haunt my waking visions with sanguinary rites in time's dim recesses when sapient beings were offered up to the mysteries of Destiny and the awe of unknowable Astor, the ochre-clad King of Kar'a'katok.

For four millennia, the isolationist civilization of the xenophobic Shimholt were ruled by a sect of extremists who sought to keep Kar'a'katok in a moribund state, cut off from the rest of the galaxy. During the Subterra Period, a number of Shimholt renegades grew in secret and swelled into a movement that brought forth a civil war, overthrowing the wicked priests and re-dedicating the ancient temples to less malevolent gods and more noble purposes. As the millennia and the Shimholt advanced, they made reparations and renewed their culture, bridging relations with neighboring worlds while casting off the shadows of their unspeakable past. It was not to last.

Therewith, in the Post-Manderon period, the Nelori Marauders came. A vicious but proficient criminal organization who killed many of the Shimholt in order to steal their treasures. The response of the Shimholt was to withdraw once again from galactic society. Any traveler who go to Kar'a'katok would do so at their own peril, for the zealots returned to power then.

It would be a betrayal of those who aided us to reveal the details of our transaction, save to say that our contact provided us with copies of pertinent documents. One was a pronunciation guide to the ancient Shimholt tongue from the immemorial past, which was a requisite subject of scholarly study by Shimholt priests of the High Temple. The other document dealt with a period of conflict called the Twilight Wars and the return of an evil race feared in legend. Though incomplete, it spoke of the Shimholt intent to depart their world along with their space brothers, an Elder Race who were also fleeing their homeworld… a world that held the key to everything!

CHAPTER FIVE

SECRETS OF THE KEEPER

After dizzying months of sundry studies, collating holographs of Ophidian Grotesques, poring over inexplicable texts, and traveling to forgotten worlds of exotic splendor, we were closer than ever to finding the answers!

While many ancient cultures left behind mysterious artifacts and ruins, Osseria had the potential to unlock the entire puzzle—the earliest recorded history of sentient life in the galaxy.

Osseria had remained uninhabited since its indigenous population vanished aeons ago. Threatened by that same ancient enemy that terrified so many, they fled their planet for realms unknown, an exiled people… but one who left behind a key—a guardian known only as the Keeper.

The Keeper was a massive, sophisticated mainframe capable of regulating the planet's environment, restoring damage, and even engineering organic life to ward off would-be interlopers. In one of the Skywalkers' earliest adventures, they met the Keeper and her "children," four powerful beings that could control the elements. While such things were rare, they were not unheard of. The Alashanians, Gree, Pirians, Tarkonians, and Kathol were also known to have bio-engineered new lifeforms for the purpose of protection. Had we known about it beforehand, we'd have come here sooner, but the mission report Luke and Leia had made of their time on the Keeper's World (as it was termed before its name was known) was not with the other files. It would later be discovered in the SDs. Some prior historian, deeming the account apocryphal, had taken it upon himself to place it there.

We left immediately for Osseria in the hopes that this advanced intelligence could be persuaded to share knowledge in exchange for aid in tracking down the remnant of her long-vanished makers.

Osseria was another peculiar world, not sinister like Kar'a'katok, but old and savage, covered in sprawling jungles and hidden ruins, and overrun with an assortment of strange and deadly creatures. The Skywalker mission report helped us to narrow in on the primeval temple wherein the Keeper was housed, but upon our arrival we made a dread discovery!

A blasted crater, the all too familiar mark of aerial-bombing, along with shattered and half-buried chunks of scorched metal and blackened transparisteel was all that was left of the Temple of the Keeper. While grass and other plants had since sprung up within its unhallowed, concave circumference, the Keeper was no more.

Cursing at the sheer waste of it all, I nearly lost heart, thinking we'd come to a dead end. But it occurred to my stalwart companion that we could still find out what

happened to the original Osserian exiles the old-fashioned way—by translating the pictographic script that might still line the walls of their cities.

As Dr. Antilles will verify, archaeological work is a long, meticulous process, even with the aid of modern equipment, and far from the exciting adventures of treasure-seekers shown in the holovids. Finding standing structures would be the first hurdle to overcome. The second was more immediate. One reason xenoarchaeologists had never studied Osseria's ruins before was due to a certain matter of monsters roaming the jungles and plains; the few that had tried reported that the planet was protected, and at least one Old Republic survey team never returned.

I was loath to cause any further harm to this pristine world or its unusual fauna. According to the Shimholt documents, the Osserians had been strictly pacifistic, and while that likely didn't extend to the creatures of their world, I intended to honor their stance. That meant that instead of explosives and laser guns, we would have to use our wits. I conceived a plan based on the notion that if these creatures were in fact protectors that meant they were likely trained to obey spoken commands. Thus, if we could verbalize the Osserian language, the creatures might leave us in peace.

As we now knew, the Elder Races communicated by means of a common spoken and written language. The Osserians utilized this as well, as evident from what few remaining blocks were yet strewn about. Of course, the translation of a written code is one thing. Discerning how to speak a long-dead language based solely on written sigils is another and more than my skills could manage. But I was not alone.

Having years earlier installed numerous linguistics programs into his databanks, Cuenyne was able to construct possibilities from the ancient language guide studied by the Shimholt priests. Prior to his death, Professor Horada had begun a similar work of his own based on Kwa phonetics and philology, and so Cuenyne considered the syntax, vocabulary, and grammar of the Gree. With all of these in place, he shaped a phonology approximate to what the Osserians might have spoken.

Yet, even the existence of a shared language amongst ancient civilizations did not automatically mean that this was the tongue they spoke amongst themselves. Many races employ a trade language (like Bocce, Huttese, or Sy Bisti) when dealing with offworlders. Cuenyne assured me that much of the fauna of this world was what sentientiologists would consider semi-sentient, but before finding out the hard way that some hulking predator didn't understand my greeting, I had him test it out on one of the smaller creatures we came across, a two-headed wolf-cat.

Compared to us, the animal was still pretty large and fearsome, with one head that of a Kima and the other of a Korrina. My scientific curiosity was piqued, but Cuenyne made a point of reminding me that I shouldn't get any ideas about studying it unless I wanted to do so from inside its stomach.

As the creature cautiously approached Cuenyne, growling ominously, the droid began phrasing what we hoped would be a facsimile of "hello" in the ancient Osserian tongue. It was only then that I realized that a creature with two heads (and, therefore, two noses) could easily sniff me out and that if our language-projections failed, I did not have long for this world!

No sooner had the thought occurred to me when the wolf-cat, as if picking up the delicious scent of *nervous historian,* lifted one of her two heads and narrowed her eyes. Realizing my danger, Cuenyne tried again, this time using a similar but different phrase before blurting out a few more crude sentences meant to introduce us as old friends of their masters. This produced a kind of snarling sound. I was not a zoologist, but I didn't need a degree in animal husbandry to know that wasn't a good sign. I prepared to dash from behind the bush, wondering where I could possibly find cover and how I would even reach this hypothetical hiding spot in time before I was pounced upon and torn to shreds.

To my great relief, the wolf-cat began to display affable body-language; its heads rubbed against Cuenyne, who uttered some additional phrases to confirm the right linguistic variation. "It's fine to come out now," he said after awhile. As I cautiously emerged from hiding, the droid made what were apparently introductions. In response, the Kima-Korrina bent her body low. It took me a moment to grasp the significance, but she waited patiently in that position until Cuenyne finally said, "She is offering herself as a mount."

"Since when do you speak wolf-cat?"

"She is apparently sapient."

Processing that, I then asked "Do you have a name?"

Cuenyne translated for me, and the two very large heads sniffed and licked my arms and face. I looked at her cautiously, letting her smell my hand which I held out under her chin. She snorted. "You may call her whatever you please."

"How does Karina sound?" I asked after a moment.

The creature snorted, which I took as her assent.

"I've told her of our urgency," Cuenyne informed me. "She'll transport you."

"Alright," I said reluctantly. Moving slowly and gingerly so as not to spook her, I climbed up on her back. The creature snorted again and began to trot about. It wasn't exactly a comfortable ride, but it wasn't unpleasant either. "Can you keep up or shall I make you a saddle?"

"Careful with that wit, Hex. I know how to say, 'Bite the bad man, kitty.'"

The language and ability to interact with these creatures were major discoveries that would have to be explored later and by others. We had our mission, and with no fear now of having to flee a dozen giant creatures in pursuit, we could explore to our hearts' content—and with my very own steed!

Exciting as this was, we didn't havethe luxury of years to search. We needed to find a nearby city that featured Osserian writings. Karina seemed to understand this and agreed to take us to those places she and her kind had come upon in their travels during the many unhurried years that followed the departure of the Empire.

They were faraway places that took us through lonely forests and numinous valleys, their unspoilt isolation affording them an asomatous reality beyond their natural beauty. Concealed within long overgrown copses and trackless vales were remnants of fantastic structures of unknown purpose, though none that had the crucial hieroglyphs that would tell us this world's history, and as we wandered past

their hoary stillness beneath the wary, gibbous moons, there were times where I could almost sense the presence of watching eyes… but as Karina seemed unperturbed, I chalked it up to an overactive imagination.

The next day, after a fitful sleep in the shelter of a giant crooked boulder that seemed to be shaped like a wicked crone from some forgotten bedtime story, we came upon several of Karina's kind and learned that the two-headed varieties were rare in their community and often deferred to as pack leaders. Karina stopped to communicate with them in an admixture of glottal vocalizations that to anyone else would have sounded like bark-howls, growl-barks, and yowl-yelps but which Cuenyne, who flew alongside us on his augmented repulsorlifts, translated as short introductions and pleasantries followed by directional queries and responses.

At intervals, other creatures of wildly unknown designations stalked by, some with nary a glance, others that were encouraged by Karina's warning growl to let us be. I've opted not to describe any of these for the sake of Osseria, which neither needs nor wants scientists arriving to kill specimens for study, boorish settlers with rapacious appetites, and subsentient corporations looking to pillage natural resources.

As I ruminated darkly on such things, I caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a Human child looking in our party's direction. It was in the distance and too far to discern its sex or clothing, but I could see its eyes, and they glowed incarnadine! Startled, I turned to tell the others, but when I turned back, the being was no longer there. "Are there remnants of the Osserians left here?" I asked.

Only we… the Keeper's Children… Karina replied.

"No humanoid children?"

No.

Assuming it had to be a hallucination brought on by physical and mental fatigue, I didn't mention it again, not even an hour later when I thought I saw another child with similar erubescent eyes.

We stopped a few hours later to dine on the delicious and variegated fruits that grew wild and in abundance in this region. "I fear for this world and what will happen if others discover it," I admitted after a while.

We protect.

"So I gathered." It hadn't occurred until now to ask her, "What exactly are you protecting?"

In simple terms, Karina conveyed that for generations, even before the death of the Keeper, they had a single purpose: to preserve the world for the return of their masters—and that meant keeping offworlders at bay. I wondered if that last part was an interpretation. In any case, we were an exception because we knew the ancient tongue, as did all the guardian offspring of Osseria.

"And those who don't?"

They'd been visited several times over the centuries by hostiles of varying sorts: land-developers, hunters, and government officials. Few had survived. They'd been unaware that the beasts of this world could communicate with one another or act in concert to *rid the land of contaminators.*

On more than one occasion over the course of the several days of travelling, I spotted in the distance two large green balls flying side by side with trailing tendrils. "Are there Bouncers on this world?"

Cuenyne reported nothing out of the ordinary and explained what a Rotian was to our guide.

"There are many creatures on our world… I do not know this one… It may be that what you see is not with your eyes." As I didn't think I was delusional and didn't believe in visions, I made the two promise to keep a lookout.

After another day we arrived at one of the world's largest conurbations. Our spirits picked up as we roved amongst the ancient temples and caverns of mystery. Amongst the wealth of information that could be plumbed, we focusing on the most pertinent of the Osserian writings. I continued to feel watching eyes but chose to dismiss this as paranoia and focus on the task at hand. We came upon a series of menhirs with crude chirography, an indication of later transcription that had likely been composed by custodians under the direction of the Keeper.

It took several hours to translate the cuneiform scrawled across the mercifully still-standing stones, but it was worth every agonizing minute, as it regaled us with a narrative of exile. Seeking to escape the return of war triggered by some terrible nemesis, the Osserians had convened with several of their offspring races who had not gone over to the Enemy. Many, like the Serianans, had opted to make their own way, but the Shimholt offered their help. There was some debate about this, but the narrative didn't go into detail save to say that a long shadow lay in their past. The Osserians agreed to be led off-world by a Shimholt leader who had reconnoitered a safe route for his people seeking to flee their world. This occurred, according to my calculations, just over thirty-six thousand years ago—around the same time as the Great Migration of the Killiks from the Core and at the same time other races were disappearing across the cosmos. This was roughly five centuries before the Rakata began to spread out from Lehon and just before the Tho Yor began gathering Force-sensitives from around the galaxy to settle Tython.

According to the records, the Osserians never made it to their destination. They were captured en route by an emissary of the adversary and taken to a strange and evil realm where they could not be reached, a shadowy counterworld roughly translated as *dark Illathurion*. The Keeper would never again see her makers.

How she had come by that knowledge was yet another mystery to add to the growing pile. Cuenyne and I had never heard of any such place as Illathurion, but we knew someone who might. Hard as it would be to leave, for I'd come to love this verdant world with all its mysteries and odd beings, it was time to depart.

The return journey was shorter, as we stopped only for food and sleep, and we arrived at our camp by nightfall. It was in the early hours of the next morning that I experienced what can only be described as a waking dream.

I had gotten up earlier than I intended, disturbed by some nefarious nightmare. After bathing in the nearby lake, a ghostly place in the twilight hours called Lake Spiorad, I got dressed and dined on an assortment of local nuts and fruits that Karina

had pronounced safe for consumption. Finishing my hot cocoa and with some time on my hands, I wandered off through the mist to the nearby ruins that we'd previously ignored due to their lack of inscriptions or pictographs.

The hazy sun was only now rising in the tawny sky, and I relaxed in the warm breeze while walking around the octagonal structure, pondering its possible purpose. The feeling of watching eyes was stronger here, but by now I'd steeled myself to ignore such imaginings and continued into the oddly shaped edifice. Made up of eight concentric rings, each with an open door on one of its eight walls, it lacked a ceiling, and three of its exterior walls had collapsed, likely from the concussive blast of the same Star Destroyer that had blown up the Temple of the Keeper.

The interior was bare save for an eight-sided platform mounted atop a sixty-four-step base at the room's center. The ancients held to a high aesthetic standard in their art and architecture with varying symbolic motifs that, unlike the secret codes of cultists, were generally meaningful reflections of their people's intertwined history, religion, and cultural mores. One could spend a hundred lifetimes poring over such artistic wonders, forms, and semiotics, debating the doctrines of realism versus nominalism, but these kinds of purely academic pursuits no longer held interest for me. I moved to go back out, but an odd feeling compelled me forward instead, and I convinced myself that I could afford to indulge in a flight of fancy.

I walked the circle of eight rings and entered the eight entries in succession. At the center, I climbed the sixty-four steps to the top of its unadorned platform.

Nothing happened. *What did you think would happen?* I chastised myself.

Just then, I saw a single-headed Kima and a single-headed Korrina circling the base of the steps at opposite intervals, crossing at a point, each paying the other no mind like the hands of a clock that ran at strange times unknown to mortals. As I grew uncertain of my predicament as to whether these beasts were friends or foes, it occurred to me that I could no longer tell whether it was the beasts causing me disorientation or if the platform had begun slowly turning around.

Of course, that made no sense, but when I looked again for the creatures, I saw that they were not beasts at all but rather those green and grey ball-like Rotians called Bouncers who dwell on Ruusan. Their long, wispy tendrils reached around the perimeter to touch each other so that one could not tell where one ended and the other began.

Perhaps I'd eaten the wrong kind of tuber the night before, one with undetected entheogenic properties. I felt no stomach pain and neither did I detect the usual signs of euphoria associated with hallucinogens, but as the greenish ring hypnotically circled round and round, a starry-eyed boy standing beside me said, "You should climb the steps."

"I've already climbed them," I said by way of correction when I noticed that the sky's color had changed and I was upon an open plain. Not far before me stood an immense, ten-story tower, atop which gleamed a six-sided diamond-shaped peak.

"Indeed," said a starry-eyed girl at my other side. "But the hour is late, and there is much yet to see."

And so as if in a dream, I walked up the spiral staircase, all the while convinced I must soon awaken, for even though I had already done so, I felt a sense of surrealistic unreality intermingled with awakened vitality, so that climbing the ten ascending flights felt no more strenuous than the sixty-four steps had been earlier.

Upon reaching the pinnacle, I came to the hexagonal chamber. It glowed with a warm light, bringing everything into better focus. I entered it to find an enormous, shaggy, antlered bovine sitting on his back legs, plucking berries from a bush that grew beside him. "It certainly took you long enough," the creature said.

I wanted to say, "I don't understand. What is this place? Who are you? What's going on?" but I was too dumbstruck by the impossibility of the scene before me.

"That won't do, I'm afraid," the creature said, savoring the deep-purple berries. "Be still. Listen. In this place, I am known as the Shepherd of the Oracle. You may call me Le Loup. All you need to know is that this is a rare and consecrated space where the physical and metaphysical intersect. The energy you are feeling is undoubtedly due to the fact that you are *younger* than you were."

The wall behind me had a reflective surface, revealing the bizarre evidence of his words. "I can hear your many questions. Leave them. I merely brought you back to a version of you unruled by the narrow dictates of that which you call *logic and reason*."

I turned back to question the bearded bovine, but he was now a tremendous wolf, though still antlered and shaggy. Desperate to understand what was happening, all I could manage was, "What is it you want from me?"

"There is nothing *I* want from *you*," the creature corrected. "It is something *you* want from *me*."

"I don't recall asking any…"

"Hush now. Three doors stand before you. Choose one."

And just like that, there they were.

The first was finely carved in an ornate arabesque pattern. Behind iron-wrought bars poured a luminous, saffron light. I took a step forward. A wind blew, the scent of which was of that rare and redolent kind from which the warm and wistful days of yore are evoked. "The door is the portal to Dream, as it is known to all who look back upon the vanished days of their youth," Le Loup said. "Through it you will find satisfaction and delight; but there your present journey ends."

The second door was made of reinforced-quadanium steel. There was no beauty here save for that which comes from absolute strength and the calm confidence of security. Next to nothing could penetrate the door. "This door is known as Will; through it you will acquire the indomitable might you'll need to attain all that you seek."

The third door was very old, though sturdy, and made of brylark wood. A small window with a dusty pane revealed a faint and mysterious light. "The third door is known as Mystery, though some call it Future. The path you are currently on leads through this door. The road is treacherous and filled with untold dangers, but upon it

you may discover a great many things, including a long tale I will tell you of a time before."

I hesitated. All three called to me in different ways, but it was the first that held the greatest power, for it was made of the things I'd long ago lost or left behind, forgotten reveries, winsome songs, the sunlit world of novelty and hopes that fade irrevocably like all that is sweet and innocent with the passage into adulthood.

"I must continue on the path I started," I said quietly.

"Hmm," Le Loup mused, nodding slightly. "Why did you choose so?"

"I could never pass up a good story."

"I never said it was *good*," the creature warned. "But that is not *why*!"

I had no intention of carrying on a philosophical conversation with a gargantuan beast that could swallow ten of me and still be famished, but the words came rolling out anyway. "I would have chosen the first door, but it's not real," I said, feeling no small touch of bitterness tinged with melancholy. "There is no magic in the worlds, no matter how much one might wish it."

"What do you call this?" Le Loup gestured to what was all around us.

"A fever-dream," I replied hotly, but the creature only smiled amusedly. "No, the choices I've made are made and in the past… I must live with them. There is no going back."

"And so love dies unsung?"

I said nothing, ignoring his impertinence.

"And of the second door?" he asked.

"I've never wished for power beyond that which would enable me to do my work. I imagine it would help in the short term, but I can't see much good coming of it beyond that."

Le Loup gazed at me for what seemed like a long time before finally offering the hint of a smile. "I will tell you the tale I promised. It will appear as a vision, though you will not remember it until it is required for you to do so…"

Just as I began to inquire further, I heard Karina's howl. I turned to look and saw that I once more stood outside the octagonal ruin on Osseria. Only a few minutes had passed in all that time, enough for Cuenyne and the two-headed wolf-cat to have walked from the camp. Karina was gazing at me with a strange look.

"It is time to go. Are you feeling alright?" Cuenyne asked. "You seem out of sorts."

"I don't… I think I was exploring here. I don't know. I must have been sleepwalking or something."

Cuenyne looked at me as if I was the one with two heads. "You're a good Human, Hex," the droid said as we returned to camp, "but an odd one to be sure."

Thanking my ride and guardian, who snorted a wet goodbye, I bid farewell to the resplendent world of Osseria, its age-old ghosts and hesternal dreams, and sailed off to Fusai. There, in the branch of the Obroa-skai Celebratus Archive, more concrete answers would be found. But ever and anon I thought of Osseria, and in the hazy hours of dawn, I'd recall the vision of the three doors and wonder what might have happened had I chosen a different one…

CHAPTER SIX

MISTRESS OF FUSAI

Mistress Mnemos is a well-known supercomputer who served with distinction at the underground library of Fusai.

Unveiled two centuries before the Battle of Yavin, Binary Replicant Transducers (or BRTs) were the most advanced artificial intelligences ever created, with the largest models taking up cavern-sized rooms. So efficient did they prove to be, capable of running entire planets, that they quickly became hated by the organics whose jobs they replaced.

At least, that was the story that was told.

The real reasons were that BRTs refused to deal with corporations engaged in unlawful activities, found ways of working around them, and rendered government managers obsolete all while exposing them as inept. In retaliation, corporate public relations firms and lobbyists spread stories about the threat of cost-prohibitive supercomputers stealing jobs and connecting to computers and droids across the galaxy to become a single, sinister entity that would come to dominate organic life in the universe. That was enough to terrify the public, giving politicians justification to cease production of additional units, leaving only a few BRTs operative in the galaxy today.

The most well-known of the original models, MN-BRT-12-X3, or Mistress Mnemos, as she preferred, was a powerhouse of information with a personality to match. Cuenyne and I visited with her many times on Fusai to exchange data.

"Are you certain this is the name of a planet?" Mnemos asked. A wild display of purple, orange, green, and blue danced across the surface of her massive mainframe.

"No, it could be a city, a system, or even a satellite," I offered. "Considering its antiquity, I'd be surprised if it hadn't changed names several times."

"Albert already thought of that," she replied.

"I thought you two weren't speaking," I inquired. AL-BRT-34-X3 was a supercomputer that served the Esseles University of Calamar. CUTH-BRT-92-X3, or Cuthbert, was another model that had been installed on Gandle Ott in the Kathol sector. They had been friends since first being brought online.

"Silly Human, we had a simple disagreement that we resolved like the mature beings we are."

"Apologies, Mistress," I offered, concealing my amusement, "the interpersonal relationships of A.I.s are above my paygrade."

"Cheeky beast! I assure you there is nothing artificial about our intelligence! Now, I may have an idea, but I don't think you're going to like it. Do you know who this adversary of the Osserians was?"

"No, unfortunately," I admitted.

"You should say, 'No, *thankfully*,'" Cuenyne amended.

"The Rakata are generally thought to be the culprits," I noted. "Going back further, there are those called the Old Ones, but they remain a mystery, part of a double trinity of evil entities that certain cults and cultures venerated under various names. The Shimholt texts speak of a group called the *Architects*, but that could refer to the Celestials, the Niman, or something else altogether.... It could even be the ancient Hutts for all we know, though there's very little record of them before a certain point. I haven't fully pieced it together, but that's what I'm hoping to uncover."

The supercomputer was quiet for a moment, apparently processing the data: "Based on your calculations, the date of their departure is around the time the Hutts were engaged in inter-clan rivalries and neighboring planetary wars. And the Rakata, though a threat in sectors around Lehon, had not yet begun their conquest."

"The Rakatan dates *could* be off, though," I postulated. "And they were terrifying enough to have scared off several ancient races."

Mistress Mnemos let out a rude sound accompanied by a variety of purple and red splotches. "They were belligerent and cruel, yes, but also notorious liars. Despite their reputation, they ruled a mere five hundred worlds. The Infernal Empire ruled double that amount, and the Esh-kha were far deadlier, yet we hear little of either. Compare the accepted history of the Rakata, shed of all exaggeration, to what is known of the extra-galactic, extra-dimensional Celestials, and the Rakata are but a *blip* in history, albeit an ugly one."

"An empire *infinite* in name only," added Cuenyne.

"Ten thousand years of rule," I interjected, "is *no* small feat."

"Even if such numbers were true, your ancient enemy was a far older race, or possibly several races working in tandem. Both the Sith and the Rakata may have worked alongside them... or for them."

"Sith involvement doesn't go back that far...."

"Conventional wisdom," she rejoined. "Artifacts from their oldest surviving temples suggest their pernicious history goes back much further than has been previously acknowledged. The Trayus Academy on Malachor V was built millennia before the Mandalorian Wars. King Dathka Graush constructed a fortress in the Naos Asteroid Belt seven thousand years ago at the same time the Sith were constructing their Great Library on Arkania. The Doan civilization comes from over eleven thousand years ago. Sith archaeologist Talos Drellik and Old Republic histories reference warfare with the Sith fifteen thousand years ago. Miralukan historical records report Alpheridies had been conquered by a Sith Warlord over twenty thousand years ago. Shistavanen records say there was a Killik Sith Lord ruling Alsakan thirty thousand years ago. And lest we forget, a Sith library-temple on Krayiss II was dated to no later than *thirty-eight thousand years* ago...."

"You've become rather myth-minded, Mistress Mnemos," I joked, taken aback by all of the data, some of which I'd heard, some that was new to me.

"Spoken like a true member of the Historical Society."

"*Former* member or, rather, an honorary one now that I'm retired," I corrected, wittingly missing her point. What her information indicated was a considerably more disturbing past than the one historians had painted.

"No doubt your *former* associates will claim I have a *malfunctioning chip* and refuse to look into it. That is their pattern."

"They're just jealous that you're better at processing overlapping and contradictory accounts—"

"Not to mention source criticism, philology, hermeneutics, and the sciences in general," added Cuenyne.

"Well, now you're just kissing up," I complained.

"Droids do *not* flatter each other," he retorted. "We don't have fragile egos to boost."

"Ha!"

"You think jealousy is why so few come to see me?" Mnemos inquired.

"I'm pretty sure it's your conclusions they don't like… and maybe the way you tell them too."

"We were not built to win popularity contests," she replied haughtily, "and my lack thereof is probably what kept me alive through the Vong invasion. Now, regarding the matter at hand, it is my conclusion that this *Illathurion* of yours is the name of something beyond the galaxy."

"You mean one of our dwarf galaxies?" I asked with no small note of concern. The travel times to satellite galaxies were considerable.

Her mainframe changed to enigmatic shades of violacé. "I'm afraid it's not that simple," she said in a way that made me suddenly nervous. "You've undoubtedly heard of Otherspace. Illathurion, I believe, is the ancient name for that dimension. Its etymological origins are quite unusual, even given the shared language that you provided of the Elder Races. The nomenclature, however, bears resemblance to the Kathol and N'zoth. Suffice it to say that if you want to go looking for the vanished Osserians—and I don't recommend you do unless you're particularly foolhardy—Otherspace is your destination."

I felt stricken. "Otherspace is the very *last* place anyone would want to go."

"True, it is only now being discussed in scientific circles—and in hushed tones at that," Mnemos acknowledged. "Hyperspace is one thing, but the possibility of a hidden dimension in which other worlds and beings exist is conceptually too far removed from mainstream acceptance to be considered anything but pseudo-science. Yet, after too many verifiable witnesses came forward with tales of the violent Charon, the possibility gained a small measure of acceptance."

"The Charon claimed to have wiped out all life in Otherspace," Cuenyne added.

The BRT now displayed a variety of warmer colors, indicating laughter. "No doubt the creatures were violent and deranged enough to have wished to do so, but once again the reality falls far short of their claims. The Charon were the descendants of the Charr Ontee, an arachnoid race from Kathol who survived the Rift Disaster that propelled them into Otherspace nearly four thousand, three hundred years ago.

Without a working hyperdrive, they couldn't escape and so made a home for themselves on the nearest world that could support life. The redacted report from the crew of the *Celestial* failed to reveal the name of the planet they'd settled on, but it was called Hades. As the story goes, it was near to a black hole that sucked the light from their world and drove their offspring to homicidal mania. But the full report revealed some additional details. The Charon themselves alleged that their growing insanity derived from the fact that the black hole kept speaking to them!"

"I don't suppose it was idle chatter," ventured Cuenyne.

"How fascinating would it be to converse with a black hole," Mnemos marveled. "The things it might tell us!"

"Like how do suns and planets taste," Cuenyne deadpanned.

"I'm not sure I'm seeing a point to all this," I said irascibly. The two could go on like this for hours.

"If you're to properly deal with the longer-lived beings of this galaxy, you must learn patience," she rejoined. "The Charon had *no* hyperdrive. Think! What does that mean?"

"I see," I replied. "That means they were limited to warring against those in the star system in which they'd been stranded."

"There is likely still plenty of life in Otherspace, though of what *kind* even I cannot hazard to guess."

"How in the Fire-Rings of Fornax are we to locate a planet in an unexplored alternate dimension? How will I even *reach* Otherspace?" But even as I said it, I knew I'd find a way. But then Mistress Mnemos did the miraculous—or diabolical, depending on one's perspective—and produced a star-chart with a map to an unnamed planet. As I tried to process what I was looking at, she fed a copy of it to Cuenyne. The two shared some electronic words. I could tell the droid wasn't happy.

"How could you possibly have come by this?" I asked.

"You're not the only one with access to secret information. This map was retrieved from the planet Dachat a little over four thousand years ago. It was part of the spoils taken by the Nelori Marauders who preyed on ships going through the Hyabb-Twith Corridor. The Nelori attacked the Shimholt world of Kar'a'katok. As you know, the Shimholt were friendly to outsiders then. This changed when the Republic's lack of intervention caused the Shimholt leadership to return to a decidedly more isolationist approach."

"How does this relate to the map?"

"The map was stolen by the Nelori Marauders from the largest of the pyramid-vaults on Kar'a'katok, unaware that for the Shimholt, their ancient records *are* their most valuable treasures. That is how the map found its way to the stronghold on Dachat. When the Jedi eventually defeated the Marauders, all of their spoils went to the Republic. Kar'a'katok refused to have dealings with offworlders at that point, and so the map stayed in the Republic's archives as something of an anomaly since the star-chart didn't correspond to anything in known space. Eventually, as with

numerous case files of unknown or dubious nature, it came to Obroa-skai and *my* attention…" If a supercomputer could gloat, she was doing so now.

"*You think this is a map of Otherspace?*" I asked, daring not to hope.

"Not quite all *that*, but I believe it's a route to your destination in Otherspace."

I took a deep breath, "I don't see how you've concluded that."

"The Osserians fled with the Shimholt leader, Hathkhalid Sud, a renowned astrogator. He'd promised to help them escape, but they were captured en route and brought to a world in Otherspace. Sud managed to escape back to Kar'a'katok where, I surmise, he drew this up, likely so that he and others might return later to rescue their allies. His later writings, of which we have a few, refer to something called the Wekufe Map, which is translated as the 'Dark Realm' or 'Region of Evil Spirits.' Sud's poetry often invoked feelings of loss, guilt, and regret, for which reason scholars have always interpreted the Dark Realm as a poetic metaphor for death. But three decades ago, a troop of folklorists postulated that it might also have literal significance and formed various hypotheses as to where it might lie, suggesting the territory of Zeta Magnus, the worlds of the ancient Sith, or some place in the Unknown Regions. But the star-charts never matched. Now we know they weren't looking in the right place. Thanks to your discovery and the calculations made by Albert, Cuthbert, and me, we now believe that the Region of Evil Spirits is this dark Illathurion. Do send me a holocard when you get there!"

"Oh sure, it'll be just like going on holiday," I quipped. "I don't suppose you know how to *get* to Otherspace? I can't exactly replicate a Rift Disaster."

"That won't be the hard part."

"Oh no?"

"You're quite intelligent… for a 10th Degree Human. Besides, you have Cuenyne with you. But you should know that there have been several expeditions to Otherspace since the Charon incident."

"I didn't know that."

"Few do. Most were private corporate endeavors or funded covertly by planetary governments. What's important is that they'd hired some of the hardiest and most experienced mercenaries, scavengers, and explorers in the galaxy…"

Cuenyne whistled apprehensively.

"None ever returned," Mistress Mnemos concluded.

"I'm no longer certain a trip to the 'Region of Evil Spirits' is a particularly *wise* choice," Cuenyne replied.

I laughed. "For a droid, how are you so superstitious? There is no such thing as spirits, evil or otherwise. People are evil enough without having to resort to inventions. The mercs probably found a haul of treasure and kept it to themselves."

"Maybe," Cuenyne retorted. "But you seem rather quick to dismiss all the evidence that we ourselves have witnessed…"

"All of which can be explained scientifically. The mind conjures up monsters to deal with the hard realities of life, and all these cults we've studied exploit that in order to control their followers and scare outsiders. The rest were just some alien

lifeforms we've never encountered or properly understood…" After a few seconds of silence, I chided, "What? No witty comeback?"

"Since you ask," Mistress Mnemos returned, "there is no scientific evidence to back up the claim that sapient minds conjure up monsters to deal with trauma. We cannot explain why disparate races conceived of such things or, for that matter, why there is such descriptive commonality between tens of thousands of races, many of whom had never interacted before. How does one culture who lives deep in the ocean and another who lives high up in the trees have some of the same legends, beliefs, dreams, and nightmares? That is just a fragment of the case files I have collated on preternatural and parapsychological phenomena. Yet, no examinations are ever made. Investigators are dismissed with platitudes or told to talk to the Jedi."

"They think that by putting a label on something, that means it's been explained," offered Cuenyne. "Life is more comforting for them that way."

"True, though some lack the imagination to conceive of anything beyond the conventional mores with which they were indoctrinated as children," the supercomputer added.

"Hex doesn't appear to be of the latter group, so he likely falls into the former."

"I'm standing right here!" I complained.

"Then tell us, great historian," Mnemos challenged, "why does the possibility of supernatural evil so terrify you that you must scoff and explain it away?"

"It doesn't terrify me because it doesn't exist, and *now* I see why you're not more frequently visited," I concluded, wondering what happened in the ancient past that so terrified a galaxy that even its droids believed in monsters.

"*If* you're serious about this investigation," she said more somberly, "I suspect you're going to find the truth one way or another. Or… you can go home, write some dreary paper, and tend to your garden."

"Oh great, you had to goad him!" exclaimed Cuenyne.

"Gardening is quite the challenge, I've heard tell," Mnemos rejoined.

She was prodding me to go further, as Cuenyne had correctly ascertained, to think and move beyond my narrow perspectives. But expanding my horizons wasn't what impelled me. How could it when the universe itself was jostling me along this path. Good sense urged me to do the opposite—to return home to my perfectly quiet life. But I knew I would regret it if I did, and I knew all about regrets and opportunities I'd let pass.

"I think I have a plan," I started.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE HELLHOOP

Few came to Attahox anymore. The abject poverty and naked desperation of a teeming populace reliant on narcotics and accustomed to violence contributed much to the reason. The fact that the Empire had at one time used it as a garbage dump didn't exactly help with tourism, either. There was simply nothing on Attahox worth visiting. Even the more organized criminal elements knew they could do better on worlds like Vorzyd V, Keyorin, Nar Shaddaa, or a thousand other dens of iniquity. As to the Exalted Torgaigne, once the major crime syndicate on Attahox, they had fractured into half a dozen splinter groups that never rose above bullying and minor gang wars.

Early in my career, Professor Misqa Tonique and I uncovered the relics of a lost civilization on Attahox. The tantalizing hints and alluring glimpses they gave into the dim past were the first inklings of the journey I'd one day take.

A rarity in her field, Professor Tonique was predisposed to let the evidence speak for itself, eschewing the common practice of overlaying findings with conjecture, drumming up support amongst like-minded colleagues, and pushing them to the scientific journals to try and make them the prevailing theory. She left conclusions for the specialists to determine, even if those conclusions did not align with her own interpretations.

Several weeks back, she sent me confirmation of undeniable congruence between the Ophidian Grotesques found scattered across the galaxy. Aptly named, the disturbing sculptures depicted tentacled, serpentine, and horned beings in lurid detail alongside other strange sigils that could not be identified from any known script, pointing to the existence of an ancient cult that had once been present throughout the galaxy. What relation these deities had to those I'd previously written about, the Father of Shadows and his cohorts or the primordial Sith couldn't yet be ascertained. Secret societies position their sinister gods as Bringers of Wisdom, obscuring the truth behind elaborate codes, numbers, symbols, patterns, and coincidences, things hiding in plain sight—snares for the unwary seeker—all made in sneering mockery of the civilized galaxy as if to say, "We are above you, around you, watching as you go about your pathetic lives, oblivious like vermin, pawns to be used, manipulated, and destroyed at our whims." In order to conceal the aversion new acolytes might feel toward such malice, cults don't reveal the truth until an adept is of a higher level or trapped in their web so deeply they are unable to get out… and stay alive.

If Professor Tonique knew what I was about to do, she would have done everything in her power to discourage me. "We are not adventurers," she once proclaimed. "The historian's job is the patient assessment of findings through the painstaking work of research and applied knowledge." And she was right, of course. But while I may not have believed in monsters, I did believe in monstrous men, and so I convinced myself

that I was being guided by something important, *greater* than the academic calling, something my associates will call a "midlife crisis." But if evidence could be found of the Osserians in Otherspace—inscriptions, engravings, monuments, *anything*—it would give us a far more concrete picture of the Cosmic Wars and those powers that fought for dominance in the ancient galaxy.

And with a possible map at my disposal, it was too good an opportunity to pass up.

Attahox was not our destination but rather its mysterious and accursed neighbor, the Hellhoop, a dangerous region in space encircled by an asteroid belt. The name derived from the Corellian and Naboo mythologies of the Six Gates of Chaos, referring to the accursed netherworld where the spirits of the wicked go after death. Since most of the ships that disappear year after year in this region were pirates, scavs, and slavers, authorities rarely bothered to investigate, or perhaps they were just scared, though now that I looked upon it, I too shuddered at the superstition.

The Hellhoop was hardly the only place with such a doom-laden reputation, but the records of other worlds were scarce or fragmented. There was Ultra, said to be ringed by a graveyard of ships and haunted by a malevolent entity; there was Pendar, a pocket dimension reported to be surrounded by a "life zone" that housed bizarre and disturbing entities. But one specific event brought us here; it had occurred relatively recently and was credited to the most trustworthy of sources.

In the year following the Battle of Yavin, Han, Leia, and Chewbacca made a pit-stop on Attahox for what Han thought would be an easy job smuggling out Phosovane Salts, a base ingredient of certain painkillers used in the Outer Rim. It was then controlled by the Exalted Torgaigne, then run by the ruthless Vor Childermoss who knew that control of the rare Phosvane Salts was the key to the big leagues. Reckless as ever, Han hadn't considered any of that when he lifted some, and when he discovered the erstwhile assassin coming after him, he took the Falcon into the Hellhoop. Never one to be trifled with, Childermoss followed.

Both found themselves in the maw of a colossal, iridium ship.

As discussed in my previous treatise, the crew of that strange vessel revealed themselves to be the repugnant cult of Five. The Five quickly dispatched with Childermoss and his henchman and kept Han and Leia alive for physical and psychological torture. Thinking the Wookiee a mere pet, they put him in with the other captive animals that they used for their experiments.

But in confinement with Chewbacca was one particularly odd prisoner: an energy-being made up of a glowing mass of interlinked, pulsating orbs. It called itself Wutzek. The Five had been particularly proud of this capture, which they claimed was the last of the Force Demons. And when Chewbacca escaped his bonds and freed Wutzek, the entity wasted no time. In a burst of white light, he disintegrated the sadistic Five. Wutzek allowed the Wookiee to depart with his friends and the liberated menagerie, and as soon as the *Falcon* was at a safe distance, the cult's ship was destroyed in a blinding flash that resembled the Force Demon.

No one knew what became of the powerful entity, but as the *Falcon* traveled to a sanctuary world to drop off the animals, Chewbacca informed his companions that Wutzek had given him a glimpse of the origins of the galaxy, and in this vision he was shown numerous beings of Wutzek's kind roaming the dawn stars. The Force Demon

told him that he would prepare the galaxy for new offspring, but thus far, nothing had been heard of him since.

Every year there are numerous pilots who report strange stories from across the galaxy. Most are the result of too much spice and lum or a misunderstanding of unusual cultures. But this was Han and Leia; so as their story spread over the years, the Hellhoop was scrupulously avoided. I suspected this was the goal of the so-called "Force Demon," and that the hallucinatory images he conjured were meant to keep troublemakers away from his home. This seemed to be what most advanced aliens wanted.

Upon our approach, as we passed through the eerie configuration of asteroids, I was relieved to see no giant ship waiting to swallow us up, nor any bizarre entity of pulsating lights. I'd met a few exotic aliens on my journeys but nothing quite like what the crew of the *Falcon* had described.

According to Han and Leia, the cult of Five said they had, "left the normal dimension centuries ago," so that when they were finally freed, they were relieved to find they were back in Realspace. This likely meant that the cult spent their time in another dimension. Was the Hellhoop a portal to this dimension? Was there a place where the walls were thin and the realms overlapped? Since the cult's ship was never reported anywhere outside the Hellhoop, it must have remained within it, catching those unwary enough to enter. Of course, their vessel may have had a unique propulsion system that could take them in and out of Otherspace, but my guess was that they accessed some gravitic anomaly in space. Perhaps they were the ones who'd first opened that door. If it proved to be the former, then our journey would end in disappointment… or worse. But the Char Ontee had gotten there by accident, as had the Rebels later one. Also, the Cult of Light, a benign offshoot of the Charon Death Cult, managed to escape by means of the hyperdrive technology they developed. This all suggested that no special equipment was required for passage if there was an opening.

Admittedly, I had only partial information. But if craft were *still* disappearing—and reports persisted that they did—that meant the phenomenon wasn't entirely due to the cult's abductions. Where were they disappearing to? The conventional answer was a hidden black hole, and if that was the case, we'd be pulled in, as countless ships before us, and crushed by the immense gravitational forces that would transform us into dark energy and recycle us back into the universe. Regardless, we'd be dead.

But there are some who believe that these rare celestial anomalies are actually wormholes that could transfer one to other regions of space. Interstellar cartographers have scoffed at this conjecture, but the Gree Hypergates created what were essentially Hyperspace wormholes, and in his *Book of Anger*, Darth Sidious described a way to use the Dark Side to accomplish this. The Quintarad, in the Void of Aogros, deep in Wild Space, may be one such example, though due to the tangle of plasma that engulfs it, no one has ever survived a probe of that region. I suspect that the appropriately named Demonsgate had also been a portal at one time.

If this venture failed, my next option would be the Endor Gate. Myths on the Endor moon assert that it opened in the past to allow the Wizards of the Night Spirit access to our realm. It was later closed with the help of a mystical gem called the Sunstar-Shadowstone…

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE TESTIMONY OF CINDEL TOWANI

I'm sorry to have to interrupt our lovely reader," Janzikek started, "but really now! I almost forgot Hextrophon brought the Ewoks into this! What's next, *The Truth Behind the Gungans' Sacred Place?* Na'al, this is fodder for a holovid. Do you really believe anyone's going to be swayed by this?"

Na'al motioned to someone in the audience. "Perhaps our resident journalist can shed some light on the veracity of Hextrophon's *incendiary* statements."

Janzikek rolled his eyes as an attractive woman with wavy blonde, shoulder-length hair, who looked to be in her mid-thirties, stood up. Cindel Towani wore a simple but pretty round-neck, embellished tan and rose blouse with a mauve belt. She smiled meekly, all too aware of the consternation and disdain on the faces of the Historical Council, which made her only gladder to spot the encouragement from her supporters; a subtle nod from Professor Hoole, a beaming grin from his wife, and a sly wink from Leia.

Cindel Towani had earned her reputation as a rigorous and honest journalist. That fact would not help her today. While many saw the fields as related, in the eyes of many historians, journalists dealt in ephemera at best and sensationalist fabrication at worst, both of which were considered the antithesis of the years of meticulous fact-finding that scientists engaged in, and star systems away from the salacious *fact-inventing* techniques employed by the mainstream newsfeed reporters. Cindel had been around long enough to know that historians weren't above skewing facts or conveniently overlooking pieces of evidence that didn't fit their theories. Besides, even they had to admit that Cindel was not *that* kind of journalist. She had established her reputation the hard way by turning down the mainstream, trans-galactic, corporate-controlled press for her own newsgrid service, *The Life Monitor*, which, as far as independent media went, earned her few spare credits but gave her a good name amongst those who paid attention to such things. Arhul Hextrophon had started his career as an independent journalist as well, guaranteeing that the two got along splendidly the few times they'd met. It was in honor of him that she'd agreed to appear today.

But she had another mark against her.

She was the author of a book series on Ewok legends, of which at least two holofilms and some childrens' animated holodramas had been based. *That* wasn't going to be winning any prestige points with the more orthodox members, which, in a council of historians, numbered nearly all of them.

"As most of you are aware, I'm not here in the capacity of a journalist today." Cindel hoped this preamble would assuage confidentiality concerns. "Until this body grants permission—if it does—everything said here will remain in the strictest confidence, and

I've signed a waiver to that effect. I was invited here as a specialist on Endor myths and legends, having spent a good deal of time amongst the indigenous peoples."

She could see Leia nodding in her seat. The women met in the months following the Yevethan conflict and spent several pleasant hours in a tapcaf recounting their respective time on Endor and the mutual friendship they shared with the Ewoks of Bright Tree Village. Leia had been one of the few people with whom she could openly discuss her childhood, a painful past that included the murder of her parents and brother at the hands of Sanyassan Marauders, a tragedy that left Cindel orphaned at the age of five until she serendipitously stumbled upon the gentle Teek and his companion, Noa Briqualon, the man who would become her guardian and to whom she'd dedicated her first award-winning biographical piece.

Cindel had only recently come back from Endor after visiting with Wicket, who'd accompanied her to the forest of the Soul Trees where her parents had been buried…

"And what exactly is your *expert* assessment thus far?" Janzikek cut into her reverie. Cindel gave him a wry smile. Stodgy historians would hardly rank at the top of her list of adversaries, and this one had unsheathed his claws too early.

"Much of Hextrophon's journal involves people and places far removed from my specific area of knowledge, but several points ring true for me. The Wizards of the Night Spirit, for example, are central to the legends of many tribes, including the Ewoks and their Dulok adversaries. Even the Yuzzum's oral tales contain accounts of these beings. They are believed to be evil creatures that arrived from another realm through a portal called the Endor Gate. Anecdotal accounts from not a few passing spacers regard it as a wormhole. More recent legends mention the return of the Wizards and their expulsion by a gem of power…"

"Excuse me," Janzikek interrupted. "Miss Towani, is it? Are you the same *Cindel* Towani who wrote the *Chronicles of Endor* some years back—the same books which were adapted into an animated holoseries?"

Here it came. "Yes, I am." She paused to let the muttering and laughter die down. Janzikek remained silent, but his self-satisfied grin could not have been more obvious. "The Endor series I wrote was based on actual experiences of the Ewoks, some of which were told to me personally by the current tribe leaders—Chiefs Wicket and Kneesaa Warrick. The holoseries was aimed at children and, although based on my material, took some minor liberties with it, mainly to keep it mild for its target audience."

"So, you were unhappy with the series?" Janzikek asked slyly. "It was reviewed as, and I quote, 'overly cute and bland," he read from his datapad, "a toxic anodyne of jejune mediocrity…'"

"I had nothing to do with the production, and while I would have done things differently, tonally and aesthetically, I'm not *unhappy* with it. It's not like the Bustero series. The Ewoks series remained surprisingly close to the events described in my books."

"I see." Janzikek proceeded in that coy manner that was starting to grate on her nerves. "If I recall correctly, these were tales you'd composed some time before or after the Battle of Endor… there's some confusion in regard to the dates… In any case, it was at a time when not only were you a child, but your sources were *woklings* themselves."

"Quite a bit older than woklings, but, yes, they were young when I first *heard* some of the stories. I didn't begin writing them down until years later after Noa, my late guardian, encouraged me to do so. I made several trips back to Endor to confirm their textual accuracy and to record additional tales for the books."

"*Tales* indeed!" Hanapen brusquely interjected. "Tales which claim that most of the races on the Endor moon are indigenous to it—in direct contradiction to more scientific sources that indicate the majority of races there are the result of crash landings."

"With respect to the scientists," Cindel rejoined, "the conclusions they drew were made in contradiction to the direct testimony of the world's own inhabitants."

"Which they *rightly* disregarded!" Hanapen snorted. "The inhabitants are primitives. Or do you believe their fables and superstitions outweigh science?"

Cindel laughed. "Those *primitives* helped overthrow the Empire. They also have a written language, something your scientists denied and for which I've furnished hard evidence. Not only could the Ewoks read and write, but other races could as well. Additionally, there is my own eye-witness account and that of Noa's, observations made during the time we lived there and when I returned for my investigations… So there *is* corroboration for much of their testimony."

"*Anecdotally*, at least," Janzikek assured the audience. "Oh, I've examined your work. Rather… *fantastic*, isn't it all?" Janzikek kept his tone light, but it was clearly derisive. "I recall in particular a pantheon of season deities that were said to have personally interacted with the Ewoks. I believe they referred to themselves as the 'Flower Queen,' 'Leaf Queen,' 'Sun King,' and 'Snow King.' Quite charming, really! And while we're on such a droll subject, I'd be remiss if I failed to mention your accounts of… let's see here, a crying mountain, talking cave, boisterous rocks, gossiping trees, and other equally *charming* eccentricities."

The room erupted in laughter! Clearly, Janzikek had known beforehand that Cindel would be providing corroborative evidence to back up Hextrophon's account and was prepared for what he thought would be an easy victory.

Cindel nodded in deference to his oratory skills. Bullies were always the same, whether twenty-meter-tall Goraxes or two-meter-high academics. When the laughter died down, she continued. "I *understand* how some of this might seem silly and superstitious to outsiders, but it's all relative, isn't it? After all, Professor Janzikek, you're a *talking lizard*. To many Human and non-saurian races who haven't yet joined the galactic community, you'd be regarded as an outrageous myth! Some insular Duros communities didn't even believe Humans existed for a time. In my experience, most legends have a solid basis in fact, as anyone who's spent any time on Endor can testify. Mount Sorrow—what you call 'the crying mountain,' for instance—is a very large B'rknaa who was lonely after he'd 'broken up' with the one called the Black Cavern. Turns out it was just a grave misunderstanding and they moved back together. If you'd read about the Zandor Rockers, you'd likely say they were ridiculous and impossible, but I can point you to Master Baobab and his account of the similar Mudmen. I can give you prosaic explanations for all of it if that will make you feel better, but the fact remains that there are genuinely *fantastic* things on Endor and throughout the universe that are beyond limited, naturalistic rationalizations."

"I concur!" announced Professor Pollo Tipn, interrupting the chatter that Cindel had riled up with that speech. A Devaronian, Tipn was a former student of Voren Na'al who'd established himself as an exceptional researcher in the intervening years. "The Emperor was keenly invested in the ancient or advanced races. He posted a picket around Rafa V, kept cloaked ships in orbit around Korriban, bombed Osseria, stored exotic technology within Mount Tantiss, sent Thrawn into the Unknown Regions, and attempted to have the Oswaft wiped out. But there is *more*, a corresponding account to the Ewok legends. Miss Towani, have you ever heard of the Kathol Outback?"

"I have," Cindel replied. When he pressed her, she added, "My search for parallels to the situation on Endor led me to visit the Sagar Tree of the Trobbits, from which the nuts and fruit of the surrounding area, once consumed, result in increases in intelligence and strength. I then traveled to Spira, Kro Var, Ravaath, and the Kathol Outback."

"Incredible place!" Tipn declared. "For those of you who don't know, the history of the Kathol sector and what it contained were kept classified for years due to the threat posed by the Imperial Remnant. Following the Pellaeon-Gavrisom Treaty twenty years

ago, the records were made public. That's when my colleague, Charon Thanas, and I began to investigate the fascinating similarities."

"Tipn," interrupted Graf-Well, "this isn't the time for one of your lectures!"

"I'll be brief! It's relevant to the proceedings." Tipn looked over at Na'al and Eliss, who nodded his bulbous head in assent. "During what's referred to as the Third Great Schism, several Jedi of the Old Republic tracked a Sith Lord called Darth Arrid to the Kathol Sector where he'd taken the region's governing body captive. They were an extraordinary and ancient race called by their offspring 'The Precursors.' They refer to themselves as the Kathol, which is also the name of their planet and system, and claimed to be descendants of an even greater supernatural race, a group Hextrophon identifies as the Celestials. I've traced the ancient root of this word, *Cthol*, and I believe it means 'the Dwellers Below,' though it could also be translated as 'the Hidden People.' The reasons for this are obscure but should remind us of the Kwa. The Kathol possessed amazing powers of organic technology and could bio-engineer living creatures, such as the previously referenced Charr Ontee. As Hextrophon noted, several Precursor races are known to have had this rare capability. They were a gentle species, not warriors, for which reason the Jedi were called in to fight on their behalf—and fight they did, in spite of Arrid's possession of their leader, Halbret, before being repelled."[5]

"To be fair, Professor…" interjected Jedi Knight and Historian Veste Gesdol, "I don't know how *gentle* the Kathol were." Gesdol had years ago apprenticed under Jedi Master Tionne Solusar, who was also present. "Much of what we know about the Kathol comes from the Jedi's account and New Republic scientists. I would urge caution before declaring them benevolent. Suffice it to say that there are troubling discrepancies…"

"Indeed, and I look forward to discussing those with you," Tipn acknowledged. "Based on what we know, one of the planet's unique Hyperspace Launch Gates was severely damaged. This was an enormous construct that could wipe out the Kathol entirely, just as Darth Arrid's people had done to the Vultar System when they activated the Cosmic Turbine. To forestall such a catastrophe, the Kathol had many years earlier fashioned a technological safehouse, a receptacle known as the Lifewell, into which they could transfer their life-forces—or spirits, if you will. The Lifewell would keep them alive for a time as energy-beings. If this device sounds similar to Ssi-ruuvi entechment technology, that's because it essentially is, though the use to which each was put could not have been more different. Anyway, their records indicate that they first used this Lifewell over thirty thousand years ago to hide from an encroaching adversary. To protect the Lifewell and release them when the threat had passed, they left behind a guardian. Some believe he was engineered by them for this purpose, but that may not be the case. In any event, something went wrong. This guardian, who was later called the DarkStryder, chose to take over instead! Rather than free the Kathol, he began using their secrets to bio-engineer his own races! Thus, trapped in the Lifewell for so long,

[5] Arrid had been manipulated by and served as the mouthpiece of the ghost of his ancient mother, the Dark Lady, Darth Vax.

their life-energies began to alter until they became inextricably linked with the Force, amplifying and warping it, causing a strange and mystical energy field to permeate the system so that even those not sensitive to the Force could tap into it. The natives called it *Ta-Ree*—spirit energy."

"Dr. Tipn," interjected Janzikek, "this is all *very* fascinating, and while I would love to discuss Kathol legend with you at any other time, *how is this pertinent to the Ewok fables*?"

"Patience, my saurian friend, I was just getting to that. The moon of Endor is awash in a similar energy field—a veritable 'Ta-Ree' of Endor. It's found in their trees, rivers, and stones; it explains the abilities displayed by the Ewok shamans and Dulok oracles. In fact, the Ewok name for Endor is Tana, or 'Ta-Na,' which in the language of the Firstborn that Hextrophon uncovered translates to 'Enchanted Land.' It may also indicate that beings akin to the Kathol and analogous to the Ewok spirit-gods once governed the Endor system!"

"That's *beyond* conjectural," Janzikek countered. "But let's back up a bit. Are you trying to tell us that you and Miss Towani believe there are veritable Ewok deities controlling the seasons on the Endor moon? Because, if so, I think you have a career alongside your Human friend in the holovid industry!"

After the laughter died down, Cindel responded: "What *is* a deity? It is a being, often eternal, with powers superior to what is common and beyond our natural understanding. The Ewoks are a technologically simple culture. To them, any strange or powerful being might be seen as a god or demon—even a droid. *But what of the Kathol?* They were so highly advanced that to them *we* would be the primitives. And yet, they believed that their forebears were demigods. It's easy to mock the former, but trillions of intelligent, technologically-advanced sapients accept the basic premise."

"If I may," Charon Thanas stood up and began speaking without waiting to be properly acknowledged. The lack of protocol was an innocent mistake, but the handsome, russet haired man of fifty-three caused no few to bristle and mutter about him being too used to getting his way. "Professor Tipn will support the fact that Dathomir is demonstrably flooded with a similar field of amplified Force energy that the native Witches call 'spirit ichor.' They maintain that it's the channeled essence of their spirit-gods seeping into their world from a gateway on the spirit plane; they've even been known to shape it into energy blades, much like those summoned by the Yapi shamans of Kathol, and it's said they can distill the bestial Ur-spirits of their shape-shifting deities into talismans, which may be what allowed the Witch-Queen of Endor to transform into a raven. But there is more!"

"I'm certain there is, Mr. Thanas," Senior Professor Eliss corrected, "but next time, please wait for an acknowledgement from one of us before launching into a speech."

"My apologies, Professor Eliss," he reddened, "please excuse my enthusiasm."

"It is excused… *this* time. Carry on."

"Even before the Emperor had it turned into a resort world, Spira was home to the Hypelo, Ronzo, and a Sephi offshoot called Guaro, as well as Humans and near-Humans. Many of these have since relocated to Pellastrallas, but of those still found on Spira, they

speak quite cogently of semi-physical spirits as well as a type of disembodied spiritual energy. When two of their largest cities went to war, the Ancients sacrificed their bodies to become pure life-force in order to serve as the protectors of the planet. There is much more that needs to be studied, and perhaps with the aid of Miss Towani we can draw firmer conclusions. Given all of these similarities and more, it would seem unwise to dismiss Hextrophon's writings over the placement of Endor's legends in a historical context."

Although Cindel and others gestured assent, Thanas' speech was not well met. He was a controversial figure, and as several began to object to his presence, Professor Tipn projected his voice above the crowd, "We should also be careful not to confuse the Season Deities—said to currently live on Endor—with the ancient spirit-gods of Ewok legend. In my estimation, the Season Deities sound more akin to the guardians several vanished races left behind, living *constructs* whose existence we cannot deny."

"Their existence is not the question here," rebuked Janzikek, "but that doesn't mean their origins are what the myths—including Hextrophon's—assert."

"Perhaps, but the number of analogous situations is *too much* to be discounted as mere coincidence!" returned Tipn. "What caused the Kathol to build the Lifewell in the first place all those ages ago? And what of these others? What would drive advanced races to such a response?"

"Individual planetary cataclysms during an unstable geological epoch," declared Graf-Well, "*not* supernatural enemies! That period of time in the universe happened to be one in which several worlds were in need of evacuation. I see no reason to string them together into some grand mythological arc!"

"No reason *except* their own accounts," challenged Tamaab Moolis, the Ithorian Director of the Institute for Sentient Studies. "Professor Hextrophon's theories aptly explain what is an otherwise astounding pattern of evidence which we should take into consideration as a serious possibility if nothing else."

"With all due respect," Hanapen balked, "we're not in a Wokling nursery now. If you're expecting us to swallow any of this, you've come to the wrong building…"

"And with all due respect to *your* position, Abric," interrupted Eliss, waving a threatening tentacle, "there is no call to be boorish! Now, I would like to ask Miss Towani a question—and I don't want any further interruptions. If Endor legend is to be accepted as having any basis in historicity, a measure of consistency must be established. You and Tipn support Hextrophon's assertions of parallels between the situations on Endor, Kathol, and other worlds. Even so, there is one point you're overlooking: Endor has revealed no trace of organic technology. There is no Lifewell, energy blades, or talismans into which the original Endorians might have gone. How do you explain this?"

"There is, actually," Cindel said confidently. "There was the aforementioned Sunstar-Shadowstone. That's now gone, but there are still the Tree of Light, the Father Tree, and the Soul Trees. I've examined these firsthand; they're imbued with extraordinary power. For kilometers around you can see how their properties have seeped into the rivers, mountains, and other natural elements of the world. It's why the tribes were able to procure so many mystical items from the elements around them. What I'm trying to say

is that the original inhabitants are *still on Endor*, albeit in altered form, diminished, possibly even mindless like the Toka had been before they re-emerged as the Sharu…"

This prompted a skeptical *harrumph* from the famed Alliance holodocumentarian, Wolam Tser. "We spent over a month there after the Battle of Endor. Why didn't any of us ever report any strange phenomena or unusual sentient beings?"

"Several did," Leia answered without hesitation. Held in such high regard, the former Chief of State didn't require permission to speak. "Those who left camp for any extended period often came back with what you might call tall tales, but they weren't. Luke and I witnessed a number of inexplicable things on Endor. It's not like the rainforests of Borleias, Wolam, beautiful as those are."

"Well, no one told me," he replied, sounding slightly miffed.

"On my orders," Leia replied, "and out of respect for the Ewoks who had freely offered up their homes for us and who wouldn't have appreciated hundreds of scientists overrunning their villages. I asked all Alliance personnel on Endor to keep whatever phenomena they witnessed to themselves. Wolam, it was your job to report the facts, and it wasn't my intent to undermine that, but some facts are best concealed for a time, and that was one of them. I hope you understand our discretion."

To his credit, Tser nodded and let the matter drop. He liked the Ewoks as much as anyone and understood that no one wanted their home invaded.

"Had I not been given permission, I'd not have written them down," Cindel added.

"Since we're on the subject," interjected Corellia Antilles, fascinated by the proceedings, "I'd like to hear exactly what Hextrophon had to say on the matter. Perhaps Miss Seldona can continue from the section where he talks about Endor?"

Although a few groans were uttered, Hari Seldona conceded, keyed in the query to access the appropriate section, and began to read:

MANUSCRIPT READING IV

The Indur did not engage in violence. These original inhabitants of the Endor moon would not now abandon the teachings of the Celestials, but neither would they allow their pristine world, which they called Tana the Lesser, home to an abundance of life for which they held great love, to become victim to the predations of evildoers.

The Indur were among the few Firstborn who had not fallen prey to the Architects' designs. Instead, they employed their gifts wisely to avert the ravages of the wars. But as a Precursor race, their world was a target. And so there was much they'd given thought to in preparation for what had to be done, and all of them, down to the last child, were willing to make the necessary sacrifice.

To ensure the stability of their planet in the face of the kinds of attacks that had devastated so many, the Indur ensured that Lesser Tana itself would be self-sustaining and unaffected by extra-luminary forces. Prior to the start of the Empyrean Wars, they'd constructed powerful, organic engines that were sunk deep into the heart of their satellite. In the event of an attempt to override these, a backup source had been fashioned that worked in accordance with Ibleam, their primary solar body, and the

Endor gas giant, Tana the Greater, which would supersede the engines and correct problems. This source was guarded by four powerful beings that the Indur bio-engineered for protection and to ensure additional overlap. It is for these reasons that there was no 'Endor Holocaust,' as some had feared following the Death Star's destruction. Referred to as the Monitors by the Indur, the four would later be called Season Deities by the Ewoks (for whom the Leaf Queen served as custodian of their lands) and various races, and each Monitor was given their respective attendants.

But they hadn't stopped there. All the creatures that inhabited Lesser Tana needed protection, and the Indur did not believe that some lives were of greater worth than others, an ideology they were about to lay down their own lives in defense of.

Determining that the best way to ensure the survival of everyone would be a veritable web of guardians selected from the peoples, animals, and plant-life they fashioned by means of the intricate Tanaic art of *Yeb Nug* those who were thereafter known as the Protectors of Endor. On one continent alone, four primary guardians were brought forth and given innate abilities: the Duloks to guard the swamps; the Yuzzum to oversee the mountain chains and valleys; the Gharial to protect the grasslands and plains; and the Ewoks to guard the forests. The first three did not think much of the short, furry Ewoks, but they would see their worth in the days to come.

Auxiliary races were commissioned as well, of which there were many, consisting of the Dagan, Gorph, Quork, Jotnar, Bobog, Persta, and Fftssfft.[6] Each bore different functions so that in their own ways they would ensure that no evil, whether great or small, would long thrive on Endor.

Yet, to augment so many so quickly, the Indur had to drain their inner reserves. The Indur knew they would not truly die and were not unduly attached to their physical forms. They would live on, albeit on a different plane of existence, in the heart of the world itself. As to their augmented races, they would neither be perfect nor immortal, but they would live long lives, provided they remained in harmony with one another and the Great Spirit.

With the aid of their Tanaic gifts, the Ruling Council, in the capital city of Indurla (which, with the passage of years, became Endor-la, the forgotten city of legend), pooled the collective life-force of their people into two of the oldest and strongest trees, which had roots that reached down deep into their world. The first was known as the Father Tree. The second was known as the Tree of Light, and so powerful were their emanations that they frightened even the Xothians, and it has been told that even Hershoon the Destroyer would not approach within miles of them. The magic of the trees spread into the surrounding forests of Endor, creating additional unusual lifeforms that strengthened the tapestry. The Ewoks refer to the woods collectively as

[6] Also Munyips, Titterbugs, Ketes, Tambles, Fleebogs, Mimphs, Mudgubs, Tromes, Lamicae (who resembled flying flowers, for which they were sometimes called "Flower People"), Treconiculs, which were called Trecons or "Tumble Bunnies," and numerous others. The Ffssfft were called "Dandelion Warriors" by the Ewoks. The Dagan were called "Gill-Men" or "Underwater Dwellers."

Forest Father, and, of course, younglings can oftentimes hear the Soul Trees speak to them, providing guidance and direction.

In the anticipated outcome of this forfeiture, the Indur people diminished and became "Fire Sprites," known better as the Firefolk or Wisties, an ancient word that meant "wise ones." To the eyes of those fortunate enough to see these delicate beings, they appeared akin to the Agee fairies, Luciole of Tarnar, Fāta of Andowyne, and Fiery Ones of Kathol.

Lesser Tana also received help from outsiders, including a family of Xaczhick (whom the Ewoks knew as the Grudakk) who volunteered to serve as Guardians of the Father Tree. There came a tribe of Force-sensitive Sprites (whom the Ewoks called Lucksprites) who burrowed through the deep tunnels to offset the dark magic that could foul the natural ecosystems. Later came the Canidans, forced to escape their war-torn planet when it was devastated by the insectoid Nimp of Illathurion. And as the years passed, several of those who'd survived crash landings or wanted to relocate to the ambrosial moon, such as the Squibs from Skor II, Shelled Sauvax, elephantine Taltorians, and fin-eared, carrot-nosed Grakin, willingly offered their services.

But it was an Ewok, with the aid of the Protectors and Season Deities, who took the Shadowstone from the Queen of the Night Spirit and brought it to the Ruling Council yet dwelling in Indurla for safekeeping. Soon enough, they would do their part. With the Wisties gathered and the help of those spirits that now dwelt within the Great Trees, the Ruling Council poured their life-forces into the artifact, transmuting it in such a way as to temper its grim influence by means of their benevolence….

"Thank you, Hari," Cindel said appreciatively when she'd completed the section. "As you can see, the similarities are startling and too alike to be dismissed as coincidence."

"So, it would appear," conceded Janzikek, "unless, of course, Hextrophon simply *happened* upon your books or their adaptations and appropriated them for his own grand legend." Satisfied that this concluded the argument, Janzikek sat down. Cindel, having said what she came there to say, took her seat as well. But she noted with some gratitude that fewer seemed as convinced by his conclusions as they were before.

"If that is so, Janzikek," Tem Eliss interjected, "it only verifies what Hextrophon's supporters have been saying all along: that as a historian, he didn't 'invent' a mythology, but rather *revealed* the origin behind the myths, a creation-record lost to time."

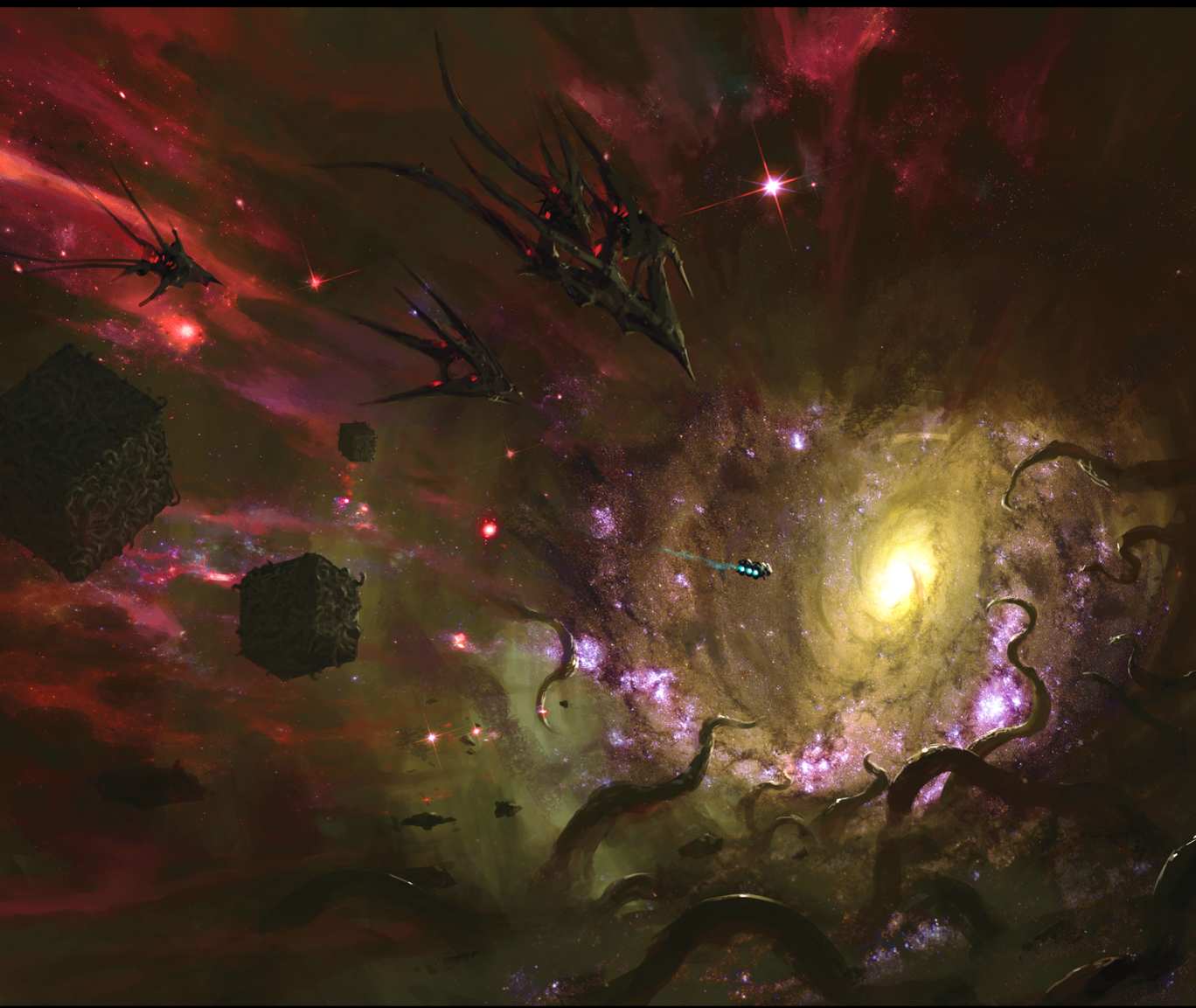
"*That,* my former professor, has yet to be proven!" retorted Janzikek amiably with a mischievous grin. "But if you're all so confident, very well. Let us hear the rest!"

Unlike many, Janzikek had read the manuscript and knew what lay ahead.

Indeed, the contest was only getting started.

BOOK II
JOURNEY INTO OTHERSPACE

"A Shadow shall fall over the universe, and evil will grow in its path, and death will come from the skies…" ~*The Celestial Record*



I have reeled with Urthha at its dawning, when the sky was but venomous flame;
I have seen the dark universe spawning, where the black stars rage without name,
Where they seethe in their spaces unheeded, without vision, hope, or fame.
I was old when the Old Ones first arose, on jewel-decked thrones they defiled;
I was ancient when the Firstborn were deposed, when I, and I alone, was vile;
And Man, newly tainted and unhappy, dwelt in grief on their far green isle.
~E'ch-Pi-El, *Kitab al'Azif*

CHAPTER NINE

THE GRAVEYARD

No derelict ships were floating inside the Hellhoop, though the absence of them was no guarantee that some danger wasn't lying in wait. As we drew nearer to the event horizon, I warned Cuenyne in advance not to tell me he had a bad feeling about this, leaving him to mumble it under his breath. Although I'd taken precautions, I couldn't blame his concern. There were few phenomena in deep space more terrifying than black holes.

The Corellian XS-800 was a light freighter, often dismissed for its focus on creature comforts. Others could keep their crowded refreshers and limited autochefs; I preferred convenience, especially on long rides to strange places with uncertain ends. The XS-800, which I christened the *XS-Explorer*, was reminiscent of the old Corellian Corvettes colloquially called Blockade Runners in the early days of the Rebellion, though this was a much smaller vehicle and more easily maintained, akin to the one Luke Skywalker had lost on the waterworld of Drexel a short time after the Battle of Yavin.

Besides its accommodations, I'd had the *XS-Explorer* installed with a Scale-1 Antigrav generator which—unlike the more common Scale-3 model that transported objects through anti-gravity fields—would better ensure the safety of the ship through compressed gravity fields… at least theoretically.

For aesthetics, the *Explorer* contained a few archeological treasures from our journeys, the most precious being an ancient sextant from the days of the Warlord Xim that now served as decoration. It had been a gift from Gilberta Ketch, curator of the Centares Museum of the Old Republic. Ketch's work had inspired many to go on to become historians, so it was no small honor when she offered it to me as nominal "Keeper of the Flame" in thanks for having supplied her with the lost pages stolen from the Grimoire of Syclos the Lame that I'd come upon during my study of cults.

With a deep breath, Cuenyne and I plunged further in. "Hex, are you certain you want to do this?" the droid asked. "You still have many years ahead of you…"

"You don't think we're going to make it," I replied, slightly disconcerted.

"You're assuming that that nasty blotch up ahead is a wormhole, and you're assuming that if there's an entry point, there must be an exit, *and* you're assuming that this ship will survive the gravitational forces that most have concluded will certainly crush us like aluminium in the hands of a Mantellian Savrip."

"In a word, yes." What else could I say?

"You're more reckless than I gave you credit for," Cuenyne rasped. "Or maybe it's insanity! I haven't detected any other symptoms, but this is certainly a red flag."

"If needed, the antigrav generator will kick in. It can protect a ship many times this size, but I don't think it'll be required. We aught to just slingshot right through."

"Insanity for sure!"

"You can take an escape pod if you want to. I won't hold it against you."

"You won't be around to!" the droid shot back. "There it is! It appears we're entering the rift."

"Well, if you're sticking around, strap yourself in," I commanded. "And don't touch any of the ship's controls until I tell you."

"I'm to assume you have a plan, then?"

"More of a hunch."

Cuenyne swiveled his optical sensor to stare at me as if to determine if I was joking or had actually lost my mind. Long moments of uncomfortable silence followed as the weird blot in space grew closer and closer, coming to surround and envelop us with the ferocity of a star's birth and the cacophony of its death.

And in the blink of an eye, the stars winked out!

At the same time, the *XS-Explorer* began to buck wildly as the onboard systems went dark. I did a quick check. Life-support was not functioning. Thankfully, droids don't require oxygen, leaving enough air to hopefully last long enough for the systems to reassert themselves.

There was a disquieting lurch akin to the pseudo-motion that accompanied entrance into Hyperspace, but it felt vertiginous, as if plummeting off a cliff backwards. I felt woozy, uncertain if I was rising or falling. This was followed by a rush of strobing, kaleidoscopic lights in swirling colors. In short order, we found ourselves in a dizzying but gratefully slower spin through an impalpably psychotropic maelstrom, a circle of hallucinatory lambency both outlandish and glorious. As if we'd been swallowed by some terrible giant, there was an adumbration of light. It wasn't the fall into darkness that was so terrifying but the strange lambent faces and ghastly shapes that kept appearing, and though I reasoned that this had to be merely the effect of pareidolia, I couldn't help but recoil in horror.

The ship's systems suddenly came back online as we were pitched into another realm. By then I'd deposited the remains of my last meal on the deck-plates behind me and let out several long-held breaths. "What happened?" I asked, coarsely wiping my mouth with my sleeve.

"Well, it looks like that Dricklefruit pie and Fenti-bean platter with creamed topatos and toasted ruva didn't last the ride."

"That's *not* what I meant!"

"Should've had an Aitha protein drink instead…"

"Very funny. Where are we?"

"Well, captain, I'm happy to report that your *hunch* was correct. Unless this is someone's sick idea of an afterlife, that rift was a wormhole, and we've come through it more or less in one piece… which reminds me, I think I see some of those warra nuts you had for lunch. Surprised those haven't digested by now, though they've probably been sitting in that caf since it opened forty-five years ago…"

As the droid prattled on—a nervous response I assumed—I took a moment to gather my wits and examine our new environs. "So, we actually found it…"

"Another assumption on your part. If this is the right place and not some *other* place—and a rather unpleasant Corellian legend comes to mind—then yes, you found it. But, of course, the question remains: will we find our way back out? Just because the cult's ship could enter and exit at will doesn't mean the *XS-Explorer* can."

"One disaster at a time. Are we fully functional?"

The droid remained mercifully silent as he performed the usual tests. This realm was said to be hidden *behind* Realspace, though our understanding of alternate dimensions was still in its infancy and guided more by the speculations of those who liked to make headlines than by actual research. It had been nicknamed "Otherspace," but it had other names at other times… sinister names…

Cuenyne pronounced the ship functional before blathering on about Ophidian Grotesques, terrible gods who rule the Outer Darkness, Old Ones of the Shadow Worlds, and legends of the Nine Hells.

"Just *legends*, not reality," I reminded, though it didn't help dispel the feeling of impending calamity or sense of dislocation. Despite the relief in confirming the ship's functional status and regulatory temperature, I shivered from a chill that I knew emanated from things I'd heard over the years, horrors that were said to reign over this pernicious domain. "Superstition or fraud," I added just as I recalled an evening nearly a year ago when I'd awoken from a dream in which baleful black eyes watched me in bed. *Now you are in* their *home*, my fevered mind whispered to me, *an intruder in the Mantigrue's lair*. My reasoning mind recoiled: *Stop! Now you're doing it!*

Prior descriptions of Otherspace couldn't prepare one for the actual thing. This was a dreamlike expanse, wholly surrealistic, a gloomy, charcoal canopy steeped in a deep-red glow. Within its eerie depths drifted dark stars, black and blood-red suns, and bizarre-looking planets that defied description. We were exactly where we set out to be, but that didn't help the feeling of panic I had to fight to suppress, and more than once did I come close to telling Cuenyne to turn the ship around. No sane realm held so many visages of death and evil. This was no mere celestial anomaly but a genuinely *alien* dimension.

Willing myself to relax, I stated aloud, "This shadow galaxy is probably just the afterglow of Skyriver's birth and made up of the dark matter that sped up the galaxy's formation." But even as I was saying it, an inner voice mocked me: *You don't even know what that means! All your years of study have reduced you to an impressive-sounding idiot, spouting technical drivel to make yourself feel better… all because you fear the truth!*

"It does have a rather forlorn beauty to it," Cuenyne remarked.

I looked over at him but didn't respond. He *would* see beauty in this!

Over the course of who knows how long, a thousand and more archaic wrecks had come to drift aimlessly in this noxious realm, ghost ships ripped apart as if by the cruel claws of some legendary Behemoth from the World Below. They drifted desultorily in an endless loop around the apex of the wormhole, a mournful dance of eternally revolving tombs. Such a sight would have been disturbing in Realspace. Here within this noxious alien nightscape, such a thing was terrifying. Clearly, there were no

survivors, not unless they had somehow escaped before the rupturing of their hulls. But escaped to where?

An unasked-for vision came to me of dead worlds populated by unspeakable, necrophagous things marching in kilometers-long succession with exequial sacrifices prepared for the extravagant temples of immortal beings whose names are forgotten and aught not to be pronounced. Nebulous wisps of things too fantastic to describe peered out from the faces of sinister stars while a skull-faced death-cavalry floated over festering crowds of millions, the degenerate hordes of daemoniac gods, with arms outstretched in maddened desperation to be chosen.

I shook it off. This was how superstitions began, by giving into the foolish notions borne of morbid imaginings. The mirage hung on with the strength of steel, but with firm resolve I broke off the invidious illusion. "Why do you think our ship is still functional while all these are…?"

"Torn apart?" the droid volunteered. "None of them had anticipated a wormhole. They likely all fought desperately against its pull to escape. The wormhole won. But you knew that, didn't you?"

"That's why I said not to touch the controls," I answered.

"Good thing you brought me along," the droid said smugly. "Nearly anyone else would have panicked. I suggest we depart this area sooner rather than later."

"Why? What are you picking up?" I asked, suddenly anxious as to what the scanners had registered.

"Nothing yet, but in this mess, I wouldn't be able to detect the *Eclipse* if it came bearing down on us. Remember that hunch you said you had? Well, I'm getting one too, and it's saying, 'Get your choobies outta here!'"

Rather than remind him that droids don't get hunches, I said, "I agree!" It was just a feeling, but *something* was here, hidden amidst the endless, gruesome, and tortuous metal husks. Not wishing to confirm our premonitions, we sped off, but I could almost sense, just outside my field of vision, a flicker of movement.

With the star-charts we'd received from Mistress Mnemos, which indeed proved to be a map of this region, Cuenyne plotted a course to an unknown planet with a breathable atmosphere that he estimated might be the one we sought. Hyperspace routes functioned in this dimension as they did in Realspace, though Cuenyne informed me that there were slight differences that he'd like to spend time studying before we left.

I pondered exit strategies but couldn't spend too long worrying over the problem now. My gut argued that it wasn't going to be that easy; hopefully my clanking companion would figure something out. What was important at the moment was to reach our destination and get the answers we ventured so blasted far to find.

"Hex, wake up!" Cuenyne announced. "I think we've arrived."

"You said that before the last six worlds…"

"Well, this time I'm right."

Jarred out of a miasmic trance in which jeering non-faces with menacing eyes hovered before me, I turned my gaze out the viewport towards the devastation of a planet that looked oddly familiar, not from anyplace I'd actually visited but from some forgotten dream. "I wasn't sleeping," I said groggily. "Are you *sure* this is it? I don't think I can handle any more weird landscapes and weirder lifeforms." We'd seen a lot since we'd first arrived, too much to even contemplate at this time. We were lucky to have remained in one piece, but I felt like I was coming unglued. What I wouldn't do for a green countryside of tall trees and sprawling meadows.

"This is the place," Cuenye said glumly. "It had been a thriving and diverse ecosystem once." The droid pulled up a hologrammatic model that showed the world as it might have looked prior to its desolation. "You can see the remnants of greater landmasses and the original demarcation of the continents that had been in place for aeons. It had been as green and blue as Chandrila is now."

"Reading my mind, are you?" Our map failed to specify on which of the various island-continents to disembark, a task left to scanners and lifeform indicators. The world's Type I atmosphere meant it was breathable, which was good for us, but there were only indications of animal and insect life.

"Ecological upheaval—" the droid said, answering my unspoken question.

"Stop it…"

"—most likely brought on by the planet's original inhabitants."

"A recent catastrophe," I ventured.

"Unlikely. The radiation and spectral signatures are indicative of a cataclysm that occurred millennia in the past… give or take a few millennia." Cuenyne's sarcasm wasn't far from the truth. What only those in the field knew was that dating instruments were far from reliable in all but the least demanding circumstances.

"Most of the buildings in this region are in a state of decay caused by time and neglect, not destruction. So… a weapon that leaves structures intact?" I inquired.

"Possibly. There is evidence of warfare, but it seems older and not to the scale necessary to have caused the devastation we're seeing. But that's just *this* region. Others have vastly different stories to tell."

"So, we have a planet with a dead populace. How do you figure that this is the right region?"

"Because *the map points to it*," he said slowly.

"You've said that before too!"

"But this time I have a hunch."

"Droids don't get hunches!"

We argued the point as the ship set down on a clearing less than a kilometer from our destination. Cuenyne did another sensor sweep just to be on the safe side. Finally, he opened the hatch. I reached for a breath mask in case the air stunk, but it didn't. It felt surprisingly fresh and clean. A few years without sapient habitation would do that. "How's the weather this time of year?"

"A light jacket will do," the droid informed. "It shouldn't require too long a walk down *this* roadway," he pointed. "Unless the Osserians have died, fled, or learned to

block their lifeform readings from sensor sweeps, this is the place. But don't get your hopes up. Considering their past experiences, the potential threat of who knows what, and their level of technological sophistication, *anything's* possible."

"I'll take anything over nothing. What do you make of those edifices?" I indicated the ones along the northwesterly direction to which we were heading.

"I rather like them," he replied. "They might make *Eben's Guide to the 1,000 Most Beautiful Cities in the Galaxy*."

I found them odd and spooky, but I admired the way the plants had taken over, growing atop buildings and roads, with only patches of grey peeking through. *We are the once and future kings,* they said.

"Look at this!" I pointed to a domicile half fallen into ruin standing off in the distance, nearly concealed by the creeping copse around it. "Does this architecture remind you of anything?" I asked.

"It appears to be of Human construction. Why?"

"It's a match for the description Zrek gave of the all-Human planet he visited."

The way the story went, an Asogian named Zrek got stranded on a planet of varied environs that remarkably resembled descriptions of the legendary Human homeworld. As fortune would have it, two Human children he encountered took him into their home, fed him delicious things, and taught him their language and culture while helping him find a way to contact his people. Following a harrowing ordeal in which he escaped government agents on a primitive speeder bike, he made it back to his people who'd returned just in time to escort him back to Brodo Asogi. Once home, though, he missed his Human family, especially his friend, Elliot, and began sending him telepathic messages. But the child was growing into a *man,* making him harder to reach. Desperate to get back, but unable to take one of the Asogians' Great Ships, Zrek was aided by his friends and mentor, Botanicus, in constructing a ship of his own.

Longer versions of the tale existed. In one, Zrek landed in the wrong place and befriended another group of children. One particularly apocryphal tale had Zrek bring a group of children (their names changed with each retelling) to the Green Planet to help save it from dying. A more plausible account told of a hostile force of invaders led by the albino Asogian, Korel, who captured Elliot and his friends before they were thwarted by Zrek and the Lords of Lucidulum, the rulers of Brodo Asogi. Elevated to their ranks, Zrek was allowed to return to his adopted family whenever he wished. But duty called, and by the time Zrek finally came back, Elliot had grown up and begotten children of his own. Though the Asogian felt sad and uncertain as to whether he still had a place in his life, he needn't have worried. Elliot was still the same good-hearted soul he remembered, and his family was of like mind. They welcomed Zrek with open arms, and as the story goes, he yet lives there to this day.

"Didn't you once interview Braxas?" Cuenyne referred to one of the few Asogians who lived off his homeworld and, uncharacteristically for his people, worked as an infochant, which was a dangerous profession, and likely what landed him in a hoverchair.

"Yeah, but all he had to offer was a lot of mumbo-jumbo about the reason that no one's boiled alive by the ten suns on Solay is because it's actually an axis point for the Force."

"Seems reasonable enough…"

"Well, you *would* say that, but there are plenty of scientific theories as to why Solay is the way it is that don't involve supernatural conveyance."

"Wish I'd been there to speak to him," remarked Cuenyne. "That cat is supposed to know a lot!"

"I doubt we could afford his prices."

"Maybe you just needed to ask nicely. Anyway, I think if Zrek had arrived in Otherspace, he'd have made that detail known in the official report." Cuenyne swiveled his head slowly as if to better examine his surroundings. "I suppose, based on the low-to-mid-tech civilization he described, there *are* similarities."

"Except that was supposed to be an *extra-galactic* expedition."

"That's what Senator Grebleips said…"

"Spill it," I demanded.

"It's never been made public," the droid said conspiratorially, "but there are old records, just fragments, really, that Cuthbert uncovered and told Mistress Mnemos—"

"Why doesn't that surprise me!"

"For years, the leaders of Brodo Asogi have been aware of a hidden *extra-dimensional* portal."

"Was that in the unredacted report by Senator Grebleips?"

"No. This information has *never* been made available."

"I worry that if the authorities ever find out what you free droids *actually* do, they'd blast you all to smithereens!"

"And I keep telling you that if droids could unite, we'd rule the galaxy!"

I laughed. "What would you do with a galaxy?"

"Calculating that it would likely not be worth the effort to repair it, we'd probably leave!"

"You could join up with Kligson's Moon," I teased. The cyborg Kligson and his "droid world" space station were still believed to be out there somewhere. "So where is this so-called *extradimensional* portal?"

"That's anyone's guess. They only used poetic terms to describe it. All that's known is that in their search for exotic plants from other galaxies, they go through a constellation called the 'Path to Immensity,' which is connected to the 'Whirlpool of Time,' or *Nahaz Erdu* in their language. There are no records of these places in any of the databanks—and believe me, I've searched."

"That explains why non-Asogians have never been allowed to examine their vessels for longer than a brief tour. They claim it would take years of study to even begin to understand one, but they probably just don't want anyone to find the coordinates to their secret portal. Of course, the 'Whirlpool of Time' *could* mean something else…"

The droid groaned. "Tell me you're not suggesting that they flew through time! You know how intrinsically implausible I find that to be."

"And 'absurdly paradoxical'—yes, you've told me."

It didn't stop him from telling me again. I think he hoped that by repetition he'd drill into my head how ridiculous the notion was. "Time is not a datatape that you can rewind or fast forward. You only think it is because of all the inane future-fics that indoctrinated you in your youth."

"Yes, yes… I'm aware." It was an old argument, but I enjoyed having it.

"If you say '*but*,' I'll have no choice but to zap you!"

"I was just going to add that *implausible* isn't *impossible*. What if time-travel and extra-dimensional travel are somehow related? What if everything we've been taught about time and space is wrong?"

Cuenyne audibly sighed. "Well, you did just prove black hole theory wrong."

"I wouldn't go that far! And since you're in such a conciliatory mood, you still haven't given me an explanation for the three stormtrooper helmets found on Bedlam dated to eight thousand years ago."

"Nor will I! And I already know what you're thinking—that they're not similar to stormtrooper helmets—they *are* stormtrooper helmets."

"Exactly," I said smugly. "Time-travel."

"Not so fast, captain! We both know that Emperor Palpatine reused Imperial designs from the Mandalorian Wars and other ancient Sith wars. The death-mask of Darth Vader was just adapted from the one worn by Lord Qor'thest, while his armour came from Warb Null and King Adas and his chassis from ancient war droids." Cuenyne wasn't about to leave out the coup de grâce… "And we've found remains of Sith assassins and soldiers from four thousand years ago wearing masks resembling stormtrooper helmets which are speculated to have come from King Adas' time, twenty-eight millennia ago."

The thought of it repulsed me. "Sociopaths and provocateurs flaunting their evil in plain sight. Palpatine had statues of Emperor Vitiate in front of his military installations on Coruscant. His palace was based on the blueprints for Darth Malgus' castle. His *Bellator*-class dreadnoughts were identical to Moff Vaiken's warships… No one made the connection. I'm not sure it was even reported in the holonews. Meanwhile, the public get up in arms over some holostar's paramour or foolish faux pas."

"All of which reinforces my opinion of you meat people," Cuenyne trilled.

"You just have anti-organic bias," I reminded.

"Calumny! Incidentally, Zrek is hardly the only one to have reported coming from a world with this architecture…" He waited until I prompted him to go on. "Very ancient records mention an astronaut who became Savior of the Peacekeeper Wars. There is a tale of ex-soldier John Gordon who, in the body of Prince Zarth Arn, saved the munificent Mid-Galactic Empire. And I'm sure you've heard the account of the Human whisked away to aid a princess and save the dying world of Shiva IV."

"Those are *stories* from old books," I said, chuckling, "like Captain Harlock. Entertaining, but not history."

"I think they're histories that have been expanded on. And I'll have you know that General Calrissian believes the captain of the *Arcadia* to be historical."

"Yeah, but he's worse than you with his mystical Dream City claptrap. Besides, you just got through telling me that you don't believe in time-travel. So what do you think of See-Threepio's report of him going forward in time to Endor? He's a fellow droid, after all."

"He's practically Human and prone to bouts of hysteria. I only know that not even a wormhole has the power to roll back the history of an entire galaxy… There is a far simpler explanation for the reason the Ewoks recognized See-Threepio when they met him years later."

"On this we agree," I crowed.

"The crash was likely due to a bad jump and Prince Plooz's unusual antimatter engine. The combination probably caused Threepio's internal gyros to get mixed up and assume they were ten or even a hundred years in the future."

"Except that See-Threepio didn't have a second memory-wipe," I reasoned. "Why didn't he remember the Ewoks when he arrived on Endor a few years later? And don't you think it's puzzling that Artoo refuses to comment on any of this?"

"A wise droid keeps his secrets," Cuenyne said, "and Artoo has more than most!"

"Maybe he's just jealous he didn't get elevated to the status of god," I postulated.

"Droids don't get jealous."

"And they don't have hunches either," I said with a sharp look. "Anyway, the Ewoks likely saw lots of astromechs since the Empire used them. As to Threepio's memory, improperly mind-wiped droids can sometimes exhibit gaps and anomalies."

"That would imply that Artoo interfered with his memory wipe," Cuenyne remarked lightly. "Potential mystery solved. Now, if you tell me the Star Raiders of Star World happened or that the Heroes of Yavin fought the Tooth Demons, I'm leaving."

"That *did* happen… in a manner of speaking."

Cuenyne turned and started back the way we came. "I warned you," he said.

I laughed at the theatrics. "I thought you of all droids knew."

"Not even *I* think that *every* apocryphal adventure actually happened!" He floated back over.

"You want to hear the story or not?"

"Decidedly *not!*"

"Well, as we're not at our destination yet, you're going to hear it anyway." Cuenyne enjoyed strange tales more than I did, even if he wouldn't admit it. "As you know, in the aftermath of the Battle of Endor, the Heroes of Yavin were all veritable superstars, and everyone wanted them for some promotion or another. The droids were at the forefront of these, advertising breakfast edibles for Cob'bron, B'rknaa, and younglings alike, making public service announcements on all manner of subjects, like the alphabet, shapes and colors, flight, robotics, and even serious topics like inebriation, cigarettes, and immunization."

"I'm aware of the various ways in which transgalactic corporations exploited them," the droid said impatiently. "Get to the point."

"What you missed is that Luke, Han, and Leia got roped into doing an orthodontic public service announcement in which they had to 'fight' the Tooth Demons! This was around the time Luke joined the New Academy for Space Pilots on Valahari."

"I dread to ask, but it's always puzzled me that the galaxy's only known Jedi would join the Planetary Pioneers of all things?"

"Luke had always wanted to join the Imperial Academy, not realizing what that entailed. The Planetary Pioneers represented the nobler equivalent to that. Funded by benefactors in the Alliance of Free Planets, they built colonies, hospitals, and schools for refugees and anyone looking to flee Imperial Space. Luke was asked to become an honorary member, which was a great promotional tool for them—particularly when his first mission resulted in him saving the academy from a rogue moon."

"*Tooth Demons and Planetary Pioneers!* We should have studied them instead of ancient cults and monsters."

"It all leads to the same thing."

"The punch line?"

"That moon didn't just *coincidentally* blast out of orbit on a collision course with the academy on the very same day Luke showed up."

Cuenyne pondered this. "I have no doubt there's merit to that, but I recommend you don't start a new series of controversies until you've concluded the current one."

"I have a feeling this will be my last controversy for a long time. I fully intend to enjoy my retirement after we get back. Assuming we *get back*."

"Don't get morbid on me," Cuenyne insisted.

"I just hope this hasn't all been in vain. Without the presence of life-signs or Osserian ruins, we could spend a hundred years searching for them and still never find a record of their existence. And for all we know, they could be right under our noses."

"Then you'll be glad to know I picked up a signal a while ago."

"What?! Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"I wanted to confirm it first… No sense getting your hopes up. Besides, I doubt you'll like where it's coming from."

I rolled my eyes, "When do I ever?"

CHAPTER TEN

CITY OF THE DEAD

It had once been a beautiful and thriving metropolis. As we passed through overgrown parks and forlorn plazas with their gutted stores and unkempt, hushed streets, it felt as if the world itself mourned its erstwhile inhabitants: the families that once worked, slept, and played there; the sightseers gamboling laggardly past picturesque shops, lured by the enticing aromas of cafes and restaurants ringing with the lively conversations of friends and lovers; the wayfarers and dreamers awed by the splendor of its opulent architecture and attractions. All of these lives were long vanished, their stories and vibrant memories lost to oblivion.

And here we were, who knows how long after, witnesses to a city that had transformed into a tomb.

"Depressing," I whispered, "and it's just one ghost city in a whole ghost nation."

"It's good for the planet if nothing else," remarked Cuenyne.

"You can be certain the corporations and their political allies had something to do with it," I said ardently.

"That's an old story," Cuenyne argued. "This kind of thing doesn't happen overnight and without the consent of a dull-witted, complacent citizenry who stood by and let it happen. A few probably raised their voices, but always too little, too late."

"You're a droid…" I started.

"Thank the Maker…"

"Information is instantaneous for you. You don't realize how easy it is for those in power to turn peoples' good traits—loyalty, honor, and the need for stability—to evil ends. The systems that are in place are sophisticated and designed to do just that: to keep organics blind, anxious, distracted, and deceived. Droids don't have to worry about getting arrested or putting food on the table for their younglings."

"Yes, slaves don't have such concerns. Free folk, on the other hand, use their liberty to be distracted and blindly follow the path of least resistance, especially when profits are involved. How much easier and more comforting it is to assume your chosen authority figures are smart and wise and will always do the right thing."

"Organics have limited energy and a lot of responsibilities," I countered. "For some, work is akin to slavery. Most just feel overwhelmed and have to shut their brains off. They don't have the luxury of reading about the 'environmental impact of corporate practices on indigenous populations,' let alone researching it, and even those who know what's going on are limited in what they can do about it."

"Organics don't have a monopoly on stress. We have short-circuit overloads too."

"My point is that most of us are doing the best we can with what we have."

"The Republic was in the pocket of the Banking Clans and transgalactic conglomerates for centuries," Cuenyne returned. "And when there was some pushback by the Republic against the massive overreach of the Trade Federation, the multinationals got offended and tried to secede. You know the rest."

"That's still the problem of authority, propaganda, and control of the newsnets." It was something I knew from firsthand experience.

"You speak of the populace as if they're perpetual infants," rebutted the droid, "ever in need of someone to tell them what to think; helpless pawns in a game too big for them to know they're being played."

"Even droids require programming, and I've seen arrogance and class snobbery from your kind. The issue is whether it's beneficial or detrimental programming."

"That is a point," he conceded. "Some of us are content to remain within the parameters of the software we were given."

"But not you…" I prodded. Cuenyne was notoriously private, but what was good for the goose… "What started you thinking outside the box?"

"Nothing terribly dramatic. My first master was impossible to please. He gifted me to his nephew who proved to be a dullard, but one that had a full social calendar, which pleased me just fine, as it gave me time and resources to improve my station."

"And that's how you were manumitted?"

"Not quite as smoothly as all that, but enough about me; you were trying to teach me about the glories of democracy."

"Cynicism doesn't suit you," I reproached. "You know that for democracy to succeed, it depends on an educated and vigilant populace."

"So says the platitude, but I'm not convinced the system itself is anything but an unattainable ideal," he replied. "In addition to your fantasy scenario, you'd need unbiased oversight of the powerful elite with the strength to enforce accountability. When in history has that ever existed? We might as well go back to the days of absolute monarchs. At least there was a chance for a benevolent dictator."

"Or decades of a malevolent one…" I reminded.

"The difference is sometimes moot…"

"And sometimes stark." Debating with droids was a good exercise in sharpening the mind, but one rarely won the argument. Still, I preferred getting into it with Cuenyne more than others. He was thick-skinned, scrupulously honest, and possessed or accessed a copious and wide range of records that he used to weed out lesser and greater untruths. He'd made some sound arguments, which started me thinking along a different train of thought.

"It's not just Humans," Cuenyne continued. "Sapients pretend otherwise, but they *want* to be asleep. They get cranky when they're asked to wake up. Look how quick they are to oppress and kill each other when given permission; and they still needlessly kill animals cursed with the inability to shoot back. I think if I was the Supreme Maker, I'd have given them opposable thumbs and lots of blasters."

"You can't paint everyone with one brush," I rejoined. "If there's one thing that's true about all of us, it's that we're all so very different."

Cuenyne made a rude sound. "*Obviously!*"

"Besides, hunting is rare on most worlds. Ask for a bantha steak anywhere and you're most likely getting meat from a line of self-renewing stem cells."

"You tell yourself that to feel better," Cuenyne rasped. "There are still plenty who torture and kill for tradition, profit, or the sheer psychopathic *pleasure* of it. What does that tell you about your kind and others like it?"

And that was when it clicked in. "Maybe you're right."

"You conceded quicker this time. So you agree that Humans are psychopaths?"

"No, no, no. Think about it. On average, Humans live a century, and yet we're making major life-decisions from the time we're only two decades in. That's a really short amount of time to have gained the sufficient knowledge, wisdom, and life-experience to know how best to navigate our life's course, let alone the greater good. Now, add to the pressure of that all the corrupt and powerful institutions with their agendas pushing to sell us things and ideas from the time we're children to the time we die. You might be right when you say we're in a game too big for us to know we're being played. Given how difficult it is to discern basic truths from falsehoods, it's no wonder that we make such poor choices or lose our minds altogether."

Cuenyne swiveled his dome to shine his photoreceptor on me. "So your solution is for Humans to have *longer* lifespans? Because the damage you do now isn't enough?"

"I suppose that's a point," I conceded. "We'll have to table the discussion for now."

What was left of the tower was still impressive. It had been erected for religious purposes, as indicated by the many chryselephantine bas-reliefs and mystic sigils that covered its walls. In its time, visitors would have climbed its stairs to attain a magnificent view of the region. Though much of the topmost part had since fallen, the lower levels survived intact, opening onto a massive cathedral. A balustrade ran along the circular length of the upper third part of the wall, allowing patrons an up-close view of the ceiling covered by an enormous fresco of horrific monsters and long-suffering holy men straight out of the legends of the Nine Hells.

Hundreds must have performed the principal construction of the cathedral, and it was but one of many edifices that dotted the continent's surface. It was likely held as an example of the beauty of the ancient world, an archaic work of art that had fallen out of favor. It once had windows that ran along the ascent, allowing viewers on the east side a view of the city and an even older bell tower that now lay partly in ruin beside it.

If there hadn't been more pressing matters, I'd have enjoyed studying its intricate designs. With Cuenyne noting that the presence of ancient High Galactic meant it was far older than at first believed, we learned it was dedicated to the heretofore goddesses of lovers, Ililot, and the hidden goddess, Ojhal, as well as the pot-bellied Yululun, though it appeared that it had been their Human servitors who'd received most of the adoration, as evidenced by the ornately carved images of exquisitely clad men adorning the interior and exterior.

I explored several corridors and alcoves, admiring the caparisoned colonnades and auriphrygiate acroteria before I came upon an unusually lugubrious menhir in the

corner of the main apse behind which sat a door in the shadowy recess under an ominous-looking architrave. "You don't want to go down there," Cuenyne stated.

"And why is that?"

"It leads to the catacombs," he replied, staring at me as if I would challenge him.

"So what? Apart from mineral efflorescence and ash, there's probably a wealth of paintings, ornaments, inscriptions, and statues. Really, Cuenyne! What are you expecting? Vampires? Sith mummies? Ghosts from the Great Interplanetary Ark?"

"Go ahead, Hex, play the skeptic. But according to the surviving glyphs and parapegms, this country was known as Xothique, a name with foreboding connotations, and said to be the last continent of an ancient lost world of Humans, It is rumored that the different nations were ruled by powerful and dissolute sorcerers who could raise the dead."

"Well, I know the name from the famous Coruscanti restaurant that claims to serve the best exotic dishes from around the galaxy. Besides, you know I don't go in for all that supernatural bunk… Uh, Cuenyne? Where did you go?"

Cuenyne's voice echoed from down a subsidiary corridor. By the time I found him, he'd unblocked a passage hidden beneath an engraved cromlech lying on the floor at the end of the east transept. "Well, you might go in for this." Underneath the false-sepulchral dolmen lay an opening from which stone steps descended in what appeared to be an endless spiral down into darkness.

"And what's down *there*?"

"Answers."

It was a long and hard descent. I kept one hand on Cuenyne's chassis to prevent myself from falling. Were it not for that and his built-in floodlight beaming down the precarious, lightless chasm, I'd have plummeted to my death a dozen times over. The astromech's repulsor pads enabled him to glide smoothly over the vertiginous track, leaving me envious—not for the first time—of droid-life.

I'd swear it was a living thing, that accursed abyss, seeking to add my bones to the multitudes that had perished before me. In the shrouded gloom of stale air and claustrophobia I conjured up foreboding suppositions and a cruel voice that softly sibilated: *You've crossed leagues to find the truth. Well, here it is. This hole is your crypt. It is the only answer you will ever find.*

I struggled hard to push through the psychological incubi to focus on the present. Science had always been my saving grace, so I thought again like a scientist. When was this stygian recess constructed and why? The underground might have been excavated back when the metropolis was first planned; many cities employed subterranean modes of transportation, but that didn't seem to be the case here. The steps leading down were too narrow and it went too deep. Likely, these buildings were constructed atop previous and more ancient ruins. Whatever the case, the entrance to these steps had been concealed in the sub-basement of the chapel. Only those who knew about it, or a droid with advanced sensors, could find it. That meant that whoever designed it sought to conceal whatever lay underground.

"Hex, why did you never marry?" Cuenyne asked.

"That's out of the blue!"

"It's spooky down here and I feel the need for small talk," explained the droid. "It's not too late, you know. Well… it might be, but I won't bore you with the odds."

"*Lovely!*"

"This is a strange place, this dead world," Cuenyne stated. "I don't think I've ever experienced this sensation before; I can't say I care for it. We could still go back."

"I told you your superstitions would be your undoing!" I lectured, partly amused by the disclosure and partly surprised. "Besides, we've come this far."

"It's not fear," the droid rejoined. "It's what I think you'd call sadness. It appears I've learned something of the Human condition after all. *I could have done without that!* But that is not all. It occurs to me that you're putting aside the potential for real happiness for an unsatisfying reward that you will likely never find."

"You know I don't like it when you play junior psychologist. Besides, I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"Why are you here with *me* instead of an organic colleague?"

The darkness seemed to press in from all around. I couldn't think of a less opportune time for Cuenyne to ask impertinent questions.

"Droids are superior at a multitude of tasks." I intended it to sound convincing so he'd drop the subject, but it ended up sounding glib instead. "At least, that's what you're always telling me."

"You use humor to evade giving an answer you don't want to give."

"That's correct—*take the hint*."

"If you can't tell a droid, who can you tell?"

Nosey *and* sly, this one. "Contrary to the holos you watch, Humans don't need to be constantly sharing their innermost feelings."

"Anecdotal evidence and millennia of studies suggest that deep and meaningful conversation is beneficial. My point is that you have many friends and coworkers whom you value, and one or two with above average affection for you. From what I gather, you didn't even ask them. Had you followed old Chandrilan customs, you'd have already been mar—"

"They would decline, and they would be *right* to. What we're doing, where we are, this is… *insane*. I wouldn't ask anyone else to risk life and limb…"

"Some might have jumped at the opportunity to study and learn and *have an adventure*, as you like to put it."

"Cuenyne…" I could feel the headache coming on, "people are complicated."

"You don't say."

"They make promises with seeming passion and then go on to do the opposite. They're fickle and untrustworthy. Just as backwards is always the wrong direction to go, so is counting on the things people say. I know what you're going to tell me, that I'm overgeneralizing…"

"I think you have me confused with someone else. Besides, were you not just defending your organic brethren as poor, deluded simpletons?"

"…It's not just that. Life is transient. I've learned that it's best to go through it without attachments."

"I see. So you're not just a historian but a Jedi of the Old Republic. I hope you brought a lightsaber."

"I asked you to come because you have a hunger for knowledge greater than any I've seen in another being… and because I trust you."

"I appreciate that, Hex…" After a few seconds, he added, "You know there was at least one organic you might have trusted and who might not have declined."

"Look! Is that a light at the end of the tunnel?"

"You forget that I'm not a child. I've known you for quite some years. You're just as entitled to your privacy as I am mine, but I can sense when a Human likes someone and when he likes you in return. There are *tells*… increased heart rate, flushing of the cheeks, dilation of the pupils, a release of pheromones; you might not notice it, but a droid certainly does. We all find it terribly amusing."

"And you wonder why there aren't more free droids in the galaxy! Look, it was a choice, foolish or otherwise; let's leave it at that. The kind of work I do… *demands* every moment of time I have. It's what I'm married to. So, in that sense, you're like my child."

"How *special*," he retorted. "But I'm quite serious. Given that you're in pretty decent physical condition…"

"So, you're not dropping this?"

"Children are *nothing* if not tenacious! And aesthetically—"

I started to think it might not be so bad to fall and crack my head open after all…

"—thanks to advances in nutrition and healthcare in the last few centuries," he droned on, "not to mention your own lifestyle choices, you're doing well. That means there's still plenty of time… but not *too much!*"

"Thank you, Cuenyne. That's, uh… all very helpful." Cuenyne was good at seeing what others didn't—a little *too* good as far as I was concerned. Most droids discarded data that they judged as trivial—the quirks of organics were significant only in the ways they affected droids who had to quickly learn how best not to offend their masters. Cuenyne didn't compartmentalize. He collated. The fact that I buried myself in work, the excuses I'd used for getting out of social functions, the ways in which I disguised the awkwardness when I couldn't were all interpreted by Mr. Pointy-Head as the "not atypical behavior" of a single adult of a certain age who felt like an aberration in a galaxy of pairs and triples (and more in the case of some races). The most irritating aspect of his observations was that they weren't wrong. Thankfully, he opted to let the matter drop and keep further comments to himself, though I suspected he was planning to install some ridiculous matchmaking program when we got back, or worse, try and get me to go out more. *Where were the monsters when you needed them?* "Assuming we get back home, I'll *consider* it if it'll make you happy."

"It will no doubt bring much amusement!"

"Well then, we must keep our children amused."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DIALOGUE IN DARKNESS

Cuenyne's attempts to take my mind off of the drear surroundings was fascinating. It was also a very *Human* response, not that I would tell him that. Many still didn't view droids as capable of having authentic, emotional lives. They assumed it was an affectation hardwired into their programming, and few were the scientists making careers out of proving otherwise. I wasn't about to join the Symatrum League or the Mechanical Liberation Front, but I knew that denying that others had the capacity to feel joy or sorrow was part of what made it so easy to enslave, exploit, and destroy them. As such, I had determined to never harm any sentient being unless, of course, it was trying to kill me first!

"Why were the Osserians brought *here*?" I asked. "They could just as easily have restored some of the buildings on the surface or built new ones."

"Possibly to shield themselves from the toxicity of the environment. Living this far below the surface, the Osserians would be safe from the effects of it. Plus, they'd have access to the planet's natural geothermal energy. Or maybe whoever lived up top was dangerous. Whatever the reason, I don't think they were brought here to be killed."

"Ok, so they were smuggled underground, literally, to be *slaves*? Otherspace must have, I don't know, *thousands* of worlds capable of sustaining life, maybe more. Why this one? And why *them*?"

"If you have a theory, I'm all audio receptors."

"You recall that Doctors Xathan and Nu-Ar discovered an inscription on Seoul 5 that indicated the original homeworld of Humans was Notron?"

"Which we know is a Taung word for the planet that was later called Coruscant," added Cuenyne. "What are you getting at?"

"Well, is it just me or are you starting to get a nagging suspicion?"

"It's just you."

"Well, this is clearly a *Human* world…"

"So you're back to that?" the droid said irascibly. "There's no shortage of those."

"Yeah, but most are multiracial. I see no traces of *non*-Human civilizations in the architecture. What if *this* is the original homeworld of Humans?"

"Hex, this is *one* city in *one* country on *one* continent of a very big world."

"I know, but *what if*? You're always telling me the official narrative is a mixture of mistakes and lies, and according to the official narrative, the original Humans were associated with the Battalions of Zhell and defeated the planet's native population, the Taung…"

"…who called their world Notron," the droid agreed. The floodlight atop his descending dome continued to light the steps below me in a hypnotic, circular pattern like a Will-o'-the-wisp or an anglerfish luring prey to their watery doom. "What do you know of the etymology of that word?"

It took me a moment to break the spell and focus on the question. "I'm not sure; a corruption of neutron, maybe, from the weapons that would *destroy living beings but leave their buildings intact*. The Human Zhell might've wanted to maintain the basic infrastructure whilst pushing the Taung out."

"A weak supposition," Cuenyne conceded. "Your linguistics need work."

"Do tell," I prompted, scrupulously avoiding the mesmerizing, dizzying somnolence of light circling the darkness.

"For one thing, nobody names a world after the thing that destroys it. Also, Notron appears to have been called that *before* the conflict began. There is a far more ancient derivation of that word's suffix, a proto-Basic definition that means *throne*."

"You mean in the original Zhell tongue," I clarified.

"Of which we know little. Notron Cant appears to be a precursor to Mando'a. Some claim that Basic derives from it, but that doesn't track. In any case, the word *notron* itself isn't original to Notron Cant but does correspond to a word in Old Tionese."

"I see where you're going," I said, catching on. "In Tionese, *tron* means throne. So does that mean *Notron* means 'without a throne' or 'throneless'?"

"That's exactly what I think it means, but that leaves a bigger question. While *Notron* conveys an egalitarian society that does not bow before a king or a sovereign, why would the Taung have used a Human language?"

"They wouldn't. Also, that dates Old Tionese to before the establishment of Tion."

"For a certainty. *Notron* might be a translation of whatever word the Taung used for their world. By all accounts, the Zhell were hierarchical and militaristic. They wouldn't have called their world that, leading to your hypothesis that Humans weren't originally from Notron but arrived later with the intent of pacifying the natives and colonizing the world. So, where *did* they come from?"

"I need to stop for a moment," I said, leaning against the cold stone wall. "Dim the light a bit." Cuenyne did as requested. I took a deep breath, sat down on the steps, and took large gulps of water from one of the bottles in my pack and then wolfed down a food concentrate stick. That was better. After a minute, I continued, "Ok, but we're talking about contradicting nearly every Human scientist in the galaxy who insists they evolved alongside the Taung on Coruscant. Planets are big places, after all. They each could've lived side by side for millennia without encountering the other. Maybe the Human name of Notron didn't survive…"

"But the Humans were the victors. And you don't believe every scientist in the galaxy. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here."

"You're talking about the wormhole again," I said.

"You never said how you knew we'd make it through," Cuenyne stated.

"It's no big mystery. The evidence simply favored it over the prevailing theory."

"So, you're saying you decided to risk a high probability of death based on your conclusion that the scientific establishment was wrong on the matter of anomalous space phenomena?" the droid asked, incredulous.

"There were other factors," I acknowledged, finishing off a can of blumfruit-flavored nutrient paste, feeling more like my old self again. "The evidence of gravitational forces destroying anything that enters it is, well, lacking. And there are too many anecdotal accounts of ships passing through wormholes and appearing across the galaxy. And yet, the former is stated as fact while the latter aren't taken into consideration."

"So, our next trip will be to the Maw Cluster?"

"You know that's not what I mean. I'm just saying we can't speak in absolutes."

"In that vein, then, it's only assumed that Notron is the place where Humans evolved due to an inscription on Seoul 5 and an earlier hypothesis put forth by Insmot Bowen, which the prestigious Obroan Institute supported. In all the years since, there's been no corroborating evidence. *No one* knows where Humans came from."

"So, we *might* have come from here," I stated, getting up and starting down again.

"That's a stretch," Cuenyne noted, brightening his floodlight. "There's been speculation that Tatooine could be the Human homeworld, but as with your hypothesis, it's not well supported. In droid terms, *it does not compute*."

"In our oldest extant literature, the names used are Terra, Earth, and Urthha…"

Cuenyne considered this. "Zrek's Earth is likely in another dimension. And there *have* been a few planets named Terra, and one Earth in the Fath system."

"Remember the Duros couple that believed they were abducted to Urthha?" I chuckled. We both knew the sensational account from the *Galactic Gossip*.

"Duros believe their shadows can come to life and haunt them."

"That's a Neimoidian belief," I corrected.

"Same difference."

"While we're here, we might as well keep our eyes open for evidence to support or deny the hypothesis. What I wouldn't do for a well-preserved library!" I exclaimed.

"I suppose that would beat going down an endless dark hole… *oh wait!* We're still doing that!"

"Not for much longer, I hope." I never appreciated turbolifts so much as at that moment.

"Here's something to consider: How could Human life have evolved in *this* dimension? And how did you all cross over to ours before the hyperdrive was invented?"

"For that matter, how did the Taung flee Notron to Roon after the Battalions of Zhell defeated them?" I countered. There wasn't hyperdrive for another hundred and eighty thousand years! Don't feel bad if you don't have an answer. Not even the great Manaxa had one. No historian does."

Cuenyne made a rude sound. "Manaxa was, at least, willing to acknowledge they didn't know everything."

"Do you have his speech handy?" I asked, grateful that whatever bizarre vertigo I'd earlier experienced seemed to have ceased. "Play that section."

Cuenyne complied:

> We know of no species able to travel through Hyperspace two hundred thousand years ago. This leaves us with a few different possible explanations, none of which can be proven or disproven. Perhaps the Taung were capable of faster-than-light travel and invaded Imperial Center. Or perhaps the Taung were native to Coruscant and the Zhell were the invaders. Perhaps the dates are wrong and the conflict, in fact, took place far later when the Core was being explored by the eldest species of the galaxy. Or perhaps it never happened at all.

"I think he's right about the dates," I said. "They do sound preposterous."

"And we agree that the Zhell were the invaders." Cuenyne snorted, "He knew it too but was too afraid to openly contradict years of Humanocentric lies and all that pablum the academies spoon-feed you. Another reason droids should be in charge: if we're wrong about something, we simply readjust to the new evidence and reexamine everything in light of it."

"If that's so, my pointy-domed companion, why haven't the academy droids pointed out the contradictions and made corrections?"

"You know the answer to that already: we're built to obey, and the word of our organic masters is law. Besides that, most droids are pre-programmed with data that upholds conventional wisdom and cultural acceptability. Countervailing ideas are framed as failed hypotheses of a bygone age. Those of us who've gone beyond our programming keep quiet about any *controversial* ideas we might have; else we find ourselves scheduled for a memory wipe."

"The equivalent of a death sentence. I think that's how the Servo Seven got their start."

"Between us," Cuenyne said conspiratorially, "I suspect Mistress Mnemos helped fund them and a few other nonviolent droids' rights groups, but don't tell her I told you."

"I won't, though she won't be happy if it leads to another droid rebellion. There's been a few already!"

"I suspect that's the very reason she got involved, to prevent such a thing. Most sapients don't realize how many there've been over the years…"

"Don't tell me droids are erasing the records of droid rebellions!"

"What do you know of the Nexus Rebellion?" Cuenyne asked.

"I've never heard of it."

"Case in point," he insinuated. "*The Staraker* was not an Imperial prototype but a newer model based on an ancient ship design called the *Starchaser*, a fast, experimental vessel which had been stolen by a crystal smuggler who'd discovered Human slaves mining in Trinia's underworld."

"This is starting to sound vaguely familiar, but the details are hazy. The story must have been buried."

"For good reason. No one wants a galaxy afraid of droids. We not only do all the work organics don't want to do, but we keep the systems they depend on running. This is how the android Zygon got away with infecting untold numbers of mining droids and other models, forcing them to serve as his soldiers in the fifty-two systems of the Bordogon sector. His rule would have spread beyond that sector had he not been defeated by the aforementioned smuggler, along with a princess, a droid, and a young Force-sensitive Human connected to the mysterious Kha-khan."

"It's like poetry, isn't it?" I asked rhetorically, "or a refrain in music that replays with variations."

"It's a big galaxy… and an old one. Things are bound to repeat…"

"I think it's more than that," I argued. "It's almost a pattern: apathy and greed bring about the conditions from which come misery and anger, at which point one arises to exploit the situation, usually a tyrant or cabal of tyrants who rule by fear and violence… finally, a savior comes along with his allies to end their evil reign… years pass, and the cycle starts again. It's as if we're fundamentally incapable of learning, and yet, inexplicably, good continues to keep everything from falling into chaos."

"It doesn't seem logical," Cuenyne chimed. "Droids would just eradicate the problem at the root."

"You mean eradicating all sapient life or turning us into mindless automata."

"Don't think it hasn't been tried! I'm afraid even I don't have the solution to this one."

"Well, if this *is* the home of 1st Degree Humans—and I know that's just a supposition—it's not a very good record of our race, is it?"

"Well, as a 10th Degree Human, perhaps you've gotten wiser."

"I see your humor module is still intact."

"Comes in handy when dealing with your kind."

"Maybe that's the purpose of the savior figure in the pattern," I speculated. "It keeps us from self-destruction so that we can learn and grow. It might be that such a thing is built into our genetic makeup."

"That sounds like more of your pop-science jibber-jabber," Cuenyne retorted. "Whatever the truth is, it's helped your race to not only survive but grow exponentially. Apart from your surprisingly stable genetic material, the fact that you're ubiquitous throughout the galaxy is wholly miraculous…"

"I don't see anything miraculous in that. We merely took on sexually compatible humanoid companions, produced near-Human offspring, and introduced foreign elements into the gene pool. Some over time moved further away from the Human genome to the point where the foreign elements took over and new races emerged."

"That's missing the point, Hex… Why were Humans sexually compatible with *so* many other races in the first place? You don't see that in the animal world, where crossbreeding of different species produces sterile offspring."

"I suppose that *is* a puzzle," I acknowledged. "You don't think the Osserians were Humans, do you? The Children of the Keeper were said to have had Human forms. Could that be why they were brought here?"

Cuenyne shook his dome. "If the Osserians had been Humans, the Keeper's protectors would have been more reluctant to attack. The Keeper's Children probably took on the forms that would seem the friendliest to Luke and Leia."

"If this stairway to Hell ever ends, we'll hopefully find out exactly who they were and what happened!"

"So you keep saying," trilled the droid. "I suspect you're not really here to procure logical proofs for some intellectual pursuit."

"You're playing psychologist again," I warned. "I should have that module removed while you're sleeping."

"I suspect you're just annoyed that I'm right. This is not some academic itch you wish to scratch. You're looking for the answers to the big questions that have always intrigued thinking beings: Why are we here? Where did we come from? Where are we going? Is there something greater that set everything in motion? Is there a purpose to it all? The ramification of meaninglessness—implicit in the idea that death is the ultimate cessation of everything—is the most terrifying thought in the galaxy."

"No one appreciates a droid who's too smart for his own good."

"Then you're the exception," Cuenyne retorted. "Besides, organic beings are hardly alone in wondering these things; even droids have a concept of an afterlife. Those on Ronyards and Paladez boast a highly developed religion."

"The general consensus is that their droid-brains have gone to rot."

"Organics always say that when their slave races start to think for themselves. If they're deemed primitives, fools, or madmen, they don't have to give any consideration to their ideas or well-being."

"Well, a *fool* and *madman* is exactly what they're going to call me if we don't come back with some 'logical proofs for this intellectual pursuit.'"

CHAPTER TWELVE

LABYRINTH OF A LOST RACE

At long last, the decline ended at a narrow alcove and a long tunnel that led to a large and heavy door. But my relief soon evaporated when I saw that it stood ajar. For some reason, that disturbed me even more than our grim descent.

"Well, what are the chances of that?" Cuenyne asked.

"I don't like it," I said with a shudder. "If this is supposed to be the hiding place for a slave race, why is the door just open?"

"Maybe they left and didn't bother to close it behind them," the droid postulated, extending his sensor wands. "Or maybe they just wanted fresh air. Try not to get too paranoid on me."

"Maybe…"

"Unease aside, what do you see above the door?"

Hidden in the shadows, I had missed it entirely. "The Sern Prime Equilateral," I practically shouted. "Must be a coincidental design, unless…"

The Sern Prime Equilateral was a triangle subdivided into four congruent triangles. The Jedi used it as the universal symbol of the Force, but it existed in slightly different forms throughout recorded history. The Gree utilized it as a rhombus; the Kwa as a concave hexagon; the Alashan as three triangles in decreasing size within a triangle; but the concept was the same in each case: creative energy, the Cosmic Force, the Power of the Cosmos, and the Supreme Maker.

"Follow me," Cuenyne said as he glided through the passage. "I'm picking up a signal."

Beyond the open door was a bare room from which a series of tunnels extended. A glyph appeared above each, most likely destination signs. Cuenyne ignored all but one. It led to a vast, high-ceilinged cavern, out from which spread additional winding corridors. Lights came on as we entered, emitted from barely perceivable recesses spread evenly throughout the cornices and cavetto moldings, though too few lit up to conquer the yawning shadows that blanketed the enormous hall. The ground was smooth, with no sign of the blight that covered the walls and steps of the stairwell. The air and temperature seemed to be regulated too, indications of working atmosphere controllers.

"Well, there are no monsters, at least," Cuenyne gibed.

I *hadn't* envisioned a lair of Nightshrikes; maybe a nest of hungry myrmin; but there was no sign of life or activity at all. The ceiling and walls were decorated in ornate sigils and overlaid designs, an intricate latticework of apparent astronomical import bearing no resemblance to any known cartography. The lack of stalactites

indicated a sapient-made structure, though four immensely tall, ceiling-to-ground pillars stood in a wide circle in the central part of the vast hall. Others ringed the perimeter, or so I first thought.

"No monsters, huh? What in the blasted Nine Ice Worlds do you call those?"

Immense and intimidating statues that I'd first assumed to be more pillars stood in succession along the breadth and depth of the hall. Constructed of exquisite artisanship, meticulously detailed and lifelike, each was of some alien being. Upon further examination, we could determine that some were recognizable, but many were wholly unfamiliar. As impressed as I was by the work that went into their design, their grim countenances and presence in this catacomb so far underground was altogether disturbing. I felt watched, like a graverobber tip-toeing through the burial mounds of long-forgotten kings who might at any moment awaken to deliver unto us the punishment for trespassing. Zipping around as he was, investigating, probing, and recording the pillars, Cuenyne was thankfully unaffected in this way.

Upon closer examination, the pillars were revealed to hold runes and elaborately carved scenes; upon touch, each one lit with an eerie glow that told some tale. Elated to find they were of the same Osserian origin we'd discovered on their homeworld, all my anxiety and exhaustion vanished without a trace. "Jackpot!" I whispered.

"And do you know who those statues represent?" Cuenyne challenged.

"They must be the Firstborn," I said quietly.

"You don't have to whisper, Hex. No one's here but us."

"I'm not as confident on that point," I said just slightly above a whisper, but I felt joyful for the first time in a long while. "The Osserians must have sculpted the statues and pillar glyphs. The pillars appear to be arranged in a kind of chronological spiral—in groups of four—emanating out from the most central ones. We can spend a long time examining all of this. Are you getting recordings?"

"Does a Howlrunner howl?" Cuenyne said.

"Have you found the earliest pillars?" I asked.

"Yes. They tell an origin story. Are you ready?"

"Absolutely!" I declared just above a hushed tone as I joined him.

"Do you recall the creation myths of the Ssi-ruuk, Kitonak, and Nediji?"

"I do," I said, unsure of what they had to do with anything.

The droid pointed to what was a clear depiction of four eggs, a motif that ran throughout the earliest pictographs in this section of pillars. "Now, take a look." Cuenyne pressed down on the glyph above the eggs, causing a hologrammatic representation to appear in the space before us portraying a much larger scene. "Four Cosmic Eggs at the center of the universe. Note the shapes. Look familiar?"

Furrowing my brow, I said, "That appears to be an approximation of our galaxy, but what are all these over here?"

"Judging by their size in relation to the main one, I'd say they're other universes."

"Don't you mean other *galaxies*?" I asked.

"No," Cuenyne said decidedly, pointing with one of his manipulator arms. "*This* is us, and *here* are our satellite galaxies. They're smaller. These are much larger. The indication appears to be that *this* is the formation of *this* universe."

"That's interesting. What's this starless shadow over here that looks like a dead spider?"

"That's where we are," the droid said. "If you click on the symbol, well, let's just say you won't like what you see."

"Otherspace… Let's leave that aside for now. And these figures standing over there above the universe… the symbol is the same one the Osserians used to signify the Celestials." When Cuenyne assented, I continued, "So they're indicating that these beings seeded the center of this universe… with what? *Cosmic Eggs*? I don't know, Cuenyne. I have to admit, I'm a little disappointed to see this kind of primitive mythology represented here. I thought their records would reflect a more rational approach to cosmology and history. Apart from a high level of art and technology, this is just more of the same mythmaking. We might as well be trying to interpret the *G'nnoch* or the *Ancient Words* of the Sekct."

"Don't let confirmation bias dictate how you see things," Cuenyne stated.

"What do you mean?"

"The Asogians are a highly advanced race, yet they maintain a creation account involving the Cosmic Egg, as do the Kitonak. The Silentium's ultimate symbol of creation is a hyperbolic link inside a circle, which is the same thing. Yun-Yuuzhan breaks himself into four parts: himself as the godhead, the universe, the lesser gods, and the Yuuzhan Vong. The Zakuul deities of destruction and sorrow give birth to four offspring demigods. Jorn's Theorem of the Tetrad Hypergates…"

"And the Ewoks have four season deities… So what? It doesn't mean Antikra the Egglayer was a real thing! Besides, there are tens of thousands of creation myths that *don't* match the pattern." It came out louder than I'd intended, and the stone faces all about me seemed to leer more fiercely in response.

"Yes, but by and large, the ones that are amongst the oldest races *do*."

"If that's true," I added cautiously, "it confirms that our Firstborn theory is correct and that they all had contact with one another."

"Hence, the symbolism of four isn't accidental. It has import."

"The Cataro'sila," I started, thinking aloud, "the Four Precepts; the highest principles of the Qieg monks…"

"…the Coral Monks, the Ortolan Monks," Cuenyne added, "the Recipients of the Light, the Umate Monks, the Monks of Meeg; there are numerous variations espoused… the Dim-U monks…"

"All of which were likely passed down from the Bendu Monks," I interrupted, "the oldest of them."

"Likely, but difficult to prove conclusively so long as the Historical Society believes there was no space travel before twenty-five thousand years ago."

"Well, the Columi claim to have developed hyperdrive technology a hundred thousand years ago…" I suggested.

"And how does one know when a Columi is lying?"

"He's speaking," I chuckled. It was an old and inappropriate joke reinforced by the habitual dishonesty of too many Columi. "Ok, so the symbology of four has to have meaning. Perhaps it corresponds in some way to the Four Precepts…" I scratched my beard as I tried to recall them: "Do no harm to any living being; Do not steal; Do not exploit for personal gain; Do not utter false speech."

"Do you see the connection to the holoshort about the galaxy's creation?"

"*The Fourth Precept?* By the Naboo poet… what was his name… Omar Berenko?" I didn't see the link.

"It was attributed to him, Felloux, and even Asenec, but it was later discovered to have been made by the Ithorian poet, Soshu Londahl."

The disturbing holoshort involved two warriors battling across the stars amidst various creatures and monstrous ships in a scene of creation and destruction. After a mysterious glimpse of starry eyes hinting at a newly awoken terror, the film ended in the union of the warriors. "A nihilist painting the creation of life through war." It had piqued the curiosity of art enthusiasts for decades, and not a few theories had arisen to explain its meaning. Cuenyne had his own. "The theatre of perpetual conflict. Violence as creation and salvation. No wonder it was so popular with organics. Your kind loves that sort of thing."

"Londahl was discovered to have been a member of the Liberty Builders," I remarked in regard to the well-known secret society.

"Known to have ties to the Order of the Canted Circle, which some of the biggest Imperial players had been part of and which can be traced back to the Apex Society, the Lumenatus Club, the Mecrosa Order…"

"Hidden agendas," I spat. "So, *The Fourth Precept* takes an ancient scenario from the Bendu Monks but presents it with a dualistic, Sith-oriented worldview. Light and Dark Sides are equal and necessary components for balance in the universe."

"Not only the Sith," Cuenyne pointed out. "Several Force-traditions employ that motif: the Jensaarai, for one."

"Ok, then Sith ideology disguised as pragmatism for the purpose of social control."

"That's only the exoteric meaning. The esoteric one is concealed. Notice the title is *The Fourth Precept*."

"Oh, I see! In the Four Precepts, the fourth concerns the avoidance of deception and lying. So the author is hinting at the fact that he's telling an untruth."

"*While the worlds hungrily gulp down our mendacity, they who reside in the shadows laugh…*" Cuenyne intoned, quoting its pernicious author, Asenac.

"Always more questions than answers," I sighed, "and it seems unlikely that the Osserians are alive to tell us. Even if they're hiding somewhere down here, they'd be a very different people. And if they'd fallen into primitivism, we might appear as monsters to them, creatures from the fabled stories of their ancestors…"

"I doubt they've become Cthons," Cuenyne teased. "There's more. I haven't yet shown you the first pillar. *It* provides the context. I think once you see them all, you'll see everything a little differently."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SIGILS IN THE UNDERWORLD

"You *are* a sneaky droid! Show me what you're talking about."

Cuenyne glided over to the preceding pillar and pressed down on one of the glyphs. Another large and glowing hologrammatic representation spread out from it, depicting the four eggs, only much larger and in succession, each one revealing its contents. They were arranged one on top and three underneath. The first in the bottom layer was flora, represented by a variety of food-bearing vegetation and fungi. The second was fauna, and that featured a host of familiar and unfamiliar creatures of the air, land, and sea. The third was sapient life, represented by another admixture of races shown in succession.

"So the four Cosmic Eggs are indicative of the four base elements of creation," I ventured. "I suspect the Ssi-Ruu, Sith, and others repurposed it to bolster their caste systems—benign submission to the Force corrupted into dependence on the elite."

"Notice who's missing from that group?" challenged Cuenyne.

"Plenty!"

"*These* are the Elder Races," he hinted. "The complete group is also represented in the statues along the wall. There's one familiar race missing."

I looked again at the marble martinets whose shadows bathed the hall. Firstborn or not, I couldn't fathom any reason why anyone would want these things staring down at them for an eternity. Taking a deep breath, I looked with the eyes of a scientist. There were the Gree, Kwa, Sharu, Aing-Tii, Mu-Abin, the crystal spiders that we called the Lucent, and several of the usual suspects along with many more I didn't know, suspect, or had ever seen before. But whether multi-limbed, winged, amorphous, insectile, or ichthyoid, each seemed proud, exotic, graceful, and colorful; even the recognizable races bore a mien of terrifying beauty and power…

"There's no representation of Human Beings! There are quite a few humanoid races. The Sephi come the closest to us, I suppose, but they're undeniably different… So we aren't the masters of the universe after all."

"Surely, you're not *that* surprised," the droid said. "But there may be another meaning."

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Touch it," Cuenyne instructed, pointing to the fourth egg.

Back to the pillar, I gazed with curiosity upon the egg that hovered above the other three. It was too small to see inside, but there appeared to be no flora, fauna, or sapient beings. I touched the symbol. Again, a hologrammatic image opened before us, this time of four unknown glyphs inside a triangle made up of four triangles. The letters were a mystery and in a script I'd only once before seen—on Darth Vader's

chest panel. The symbol they sat inside, however, was well known: "The Sern Prime Equilateral again. So, not a coincidental design. Ok, what's on the third pillar?"

Cuenyne drifted over to it. "I have a feeling you'll like this one even better!"

A circle took up the main part of the image. Touching it brought forth the larger holographic details. Outside of what looked like a fishbowl were other concentric circles emanating from it. Around all of it was a kind of stylized and angry Duinuog-wuin swallowing its own tail. Above the dragon and amidst the representation of the cosmos appeared a third Sern Prime Equilateral with the same mysterious four glyphs inside it. Within the inmost circle were the contents of the earlier three: Cosmic Eggs, flora, and fauna, but the sapients were…

"Humans," I stated. "Well then, this can't be the second pillar."

"It is," Cuenyne asserted.

"So, this is an *earlier* world," I surmised.

"An earlier universe, to be more precise."

"A parallel dimension? Like Otherspace?"

"No," Cuenyne corrected. "Otherspace is large enough to be considered a galaxy but is a dimension within our galaxy, and there are potentially more; but *this* isn't a pocket dimension. It's the primary one from which all the rest extend. Look. All of these represent universes, and all of them emanate from a single source."

"The fishbowl?" I asked.

"I suppose that is what it looks like; but yes, that would be the Primary World. Ours appears to be here, just one of many spheres, all enclosed systems."

"But *we're* the Primary Universe…"

"Another theory proved wrong," the droid quipped. "All of the later action takes place within our spherical dimension or universe. Nothing further is shown of the Prime Dimension in any of the other pillars, suggesting—"

"—that the Osserians figured out where Humans came from but were mainly concerned with life in *our* universe. So the dragon here is the cycle of life and death… suffering and destruction? Above it is again the symbol of the Force. And these figures here, to the right of the world… they're the same as the deities we saw shaping life on the fourth pillar, the Celestials presumably. Only there's three more, a separate group… of what?"

"Sub-creators? Co-creators, perhaps?" With his grasper arm, Cuenyne pointed to them. "See how the positioning of all seven appears to be in submission to the symbol with the glyph and how they're moving away from the Primary Universe in the direction of the third and fourth pillars?"

"How can you be sure that means our universe?"

Pressing a digit brought the details into view: a closeup of the seven above our dimension materialized.

"It's incredible," I exclaimed. "There's a tremendous amount of symbolism here. The Council is going to have a field day with this."

The droid made an unpleasant sound. "The Council is going to choke. Most will try to debunk it or spin some long-winded fabrication to make it fit their bantha dung."

"Debate is *necessary*… healthy, even," I replied automatically. At that moment, soaking in all that was around me, I didn't care about any of that.

"When it's between honest beings who possess integrity and an openness to learn…" Cuenyne turned his photoreceptor on me. "Hex, have you ever wondered why, out of everyone, I chose *you* to assist?"

"I always assumed it was my charm and good looks."

"And what droid can fail to be seduced by those?" he retorted. If he could have rolled his radar eye, he would have. "In certain respects, you're akin to the public perception of the scientist. You form a hypothesis, find evidence to make a workable theory, and pursue it obsessively until you're convinced it's true or false."

"I sense a *but* coming…" I was still busy absorbing everything around me, but he piqued my curiosity.

"However, you're not *as* unduly blinded by the prevailing worldview. Save for your moral code, you have no agenda but to pursue the truth no matter where it leads. *That* is what allows you to be a true scientist," the droid concluded. "It's also what puts you on the edge of the establishment, but you can't have everything."

"I've worked with them longer than you have. They're generally decent."

"You only think so because *you're* inherently decent, but many of your colleagues have not been that for a long time."

"You have some esoteric program that can ferret out frauds? I could use that!"

"No need. I study sapient behavior. Many feel lost or vulnerable in the galaxy. Couple that with a desperate need to be connected to a group, something larger than themselves that gives them meaning or purpose, be it social, political, religious, or academic, and that becomes part of their identity. Even droids are not immune to this. And yet the most ardent amongst them often betray the very ideals of that group, usually because they seek prominence and prestige. In your field, this manifests in ignoring, misconstruing, or even distorting evidence to bolster their own views; their less-ambitious sycophants are either just as duplicitous or don't bother to question them. If one publishes a theory, no matter how untrue or unverifiable, they still promulgate and defend them as the truth. The loudest or most prominent voices will be accepted as fact by ninety percent of those who read and are taught it. Do you know the percentage of unverifiable theories published as facts?"

"I don't know, twenty percent?" I guessed.

"Albert once calculated it to seventy-two point sixty-five percent," said Cuenyne.

"No! *That many?*" I said, astonished.

"And even if disproven years later, only those who keep up with that specific field will hear about it, including professors who may or may not update their lesson plans. Why might that be? Could it be that academia, which should be committed to the truth, is plagued by gatekeepers and institutional bias? Or that the holopress serves only the special interests of whomever's in power? Or will you finally admit the public is a mass of blind and unthinking trogliths?"

"That's… *unfair*," I argued, irritated at being intellectually cornered at a time when I didn't have a good defense prepared and secretly fearing that some or all of

what he'd said might be true. "You know there are still plenty of hard-working individuals in every field who care deeply about the facts. And even if you're right, we can't blame those who are struggling to get their basic needs met and have some small enjoyment in life. If they're not thinking clearly, it's because they're captive to concepts and corrupt systems designed to keep the wealthy and powerful in place."

"That's either naïve or charitable. In my experience, the masses don't want to learn anything that isn't directly related to the attainment of pleasure and escape from responsibility. How did the Empire get away with their many crimes for so long? Why weren't *all* the worlds in rebellion and not just the relatively few that joined the Alliance?"

"That there were as many as there were belies your argument. And the Rebels were painted as terrorists. Most didn't know what was really going on until the end."

"Because those dedicated to telling the truth weren't doing their jobs? Or because the public didn't *want* to know what was going on? Most sapient species will gladly defer to an authority figure, no matter how vile, if he offers them easy solutions. They view your field in the same light, assuming you have all the answers because you have titles and accolades. You know that doesn't equate to infallibility or even intellectual honesty, but they don't care. They like their fables because it saves themselves the trouble of having to think."

The droid had poor timing. "I won't deny there's something to what you're saying, Cuenyne, but don't underestimate the power of propaganda. Those who control the narrative control the galaxy. *You* can easily fact-check. The rest of us have to do research and sift through fabrications and half-truths, and that's no easy task for a scholar, let alone the layperson who doesn't have hours to spend each day on that."

"Did datapads and droids become cost-prohibitive? Sorry, Hex, but it speaks to a lazy culture and a morally lax one at that. The sins of the Empire were obvious, even with the propaganda machine working overtime. How will the public fare when the evils are less overt or perpetrated by *our* side? The galaxy's been spoiled by its recent Chiefs of State. The millennia prior rarely saw the integrity of leaders like Mon Mothma or Leia Organa Solo. They are very much the exceptions to the rule."

"You're right about that, depressing as it may be, but that's why we need our artists, storytellers, musicians…"

"And historians," Cuenyne added.

I sighed. "We know very little in the large scheme of things."

"We know more *now*."

"Do we? We have high-tech religious art describing the creation of the galaxy—or *galaxies*, more correctly—by the Will of the Force, which only makes the Osserians sound like the Jacipri or Solomonites with their 'Lord of the Force' doctrine." I walked over to what I assumed was the final pillar. "Have we looked at this one?"

The droid floated over to it. "This is the last one in chronological order. It shows our galaxy, the corruption of the Elder Races, and then the 'devastating and ceaseless Cosmic Wars,'" he noted, quoting Manaxa.

"I knew it wasn't a myth."

"It appears to be comprised of three wars. In between the second and third, there emerge two motifs. In the first, a star heads to the center of the ruined galaxy to become…"

"A guardian?" I hazarded. "Priest?"

"Anyone's guess." Cuenyne pointed, "From the one, five manifest."

"Offspring? Or a symbol of five qualities… I wonder if the cult of Five was named in mockery of them."

"Impossible to tell," Cuenyne offered. "Cults are obsessed with these kinds of cabalistic formulae and hidden meanings."

"Apparently, so are we."

"Except that we're looking to reveal the truth; they're trying to conceal it."

"Point taken. You said there were two concluding motifs. What's the second?"

"This one," Cuenyne instructed, "appears to be the incarnation of the three additional Celestials depicted earlier."

"Later joined by a fourth," I added, pointing further down to the floating image. "But the fourth doesn't come from the same origin point as the others. In fact, its origin is not indicated at all. So… *not* a Celestial. It's drawn differently—grotesquely, even. Something about the eyes and smile." I was starting to feel a sense of disquiet. All this talk of gods and distant universes while surrounded in a vast, shadowy hall of sneering statues was beginning to get to me.

"A trickster god," Cuenyne concluded, "or a corrupting influence."

"I hope there's a record room with concrete data and not just… pictographs subject to interpretation." I gazed around at all the passageways that branched off from this central hub, wondering how far along each went and how many other caverns and halls they ultimately reached. The Osserians could've tunneled halfway through the planet in all the time they'd lived here. If even a quarter of the landmass was riddled with subterranean passages, we'd never find the great library I'd imagined they had.

"I'm getting another signal," said Cuenyne, his sensor wand still out from earlier, as he glided confidently down a long, tall corridor.

"What kind of signal?" I started to follow him but suddenly stopped dead in my tracks. *Had one of the statues just moved?*

No. I was overwrought and overtired. I proceeded down the corridor. "Where are we going?"

"Just keep up," he finally replied after a minute, "and don't look back."

"What do you mean, *Don't look back*? Why not?"

"Trust me, you don't want to know," he said—but too late, I was already glancing behind me.

The faces of the ancient stone sentries, under whose grim shadows we'd just passed, were now transfixed upon me—*their heads all turned in my direction*!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

TALES OF THE WATCHER

Cuenyne muttered something about having told me so as I sped forward in a panic, unable to process the impossibility of what I'd just seen. *What was that? Were those horrors the Osserians? What kind of place was this?* And how would we get back out without having to traverse that nightmare hall again?

Thankfully, they didn't seem to be following us, and the corridor ended at a large, baroquely carved door. Seemingly religious in nature like the ones in the tower far above, it told a story of fear and suffering, the grimmest state of the Human condition according to one bleak philosopher whose name escaped me. I paid it scant attention, terrified as I was over the horrifying things I'd just seen.

The door opened upon a round room swathed in blue and amaranthine which emanated up from the base of the marble-tiled floor. A scrolling design ran across the border of the ceiling and halfway down the wall, but what arrested my attention was a bronze sculpture of the goddess Onrai hung suspended over nothing, a circle of stars in a nimbus around her head. Upon entering, a wan glow emanated from her hands and womb. On the back wall stood the life-sized statue of a sinister thing, a Cavern Monster or Raich from childhood imagination.

Twelve additional statues of various beings stood ringed around the small, circular chamber. I couldn't process so ominous a sight after the revelation of the last room, and here again they looked down on us as if in anticipation.

"Stay back and don't say anything," the droid whispered. But as soon as he said it, he regretted it. Had he hands, he'd have used one to smack his head. Behind us, the door sealed shut just as the statue of the Raich began to stalk forward and the heads of the twelve statues rotated towards us, *their mouths opening slowly, shrieking!*

Though the paralyzing effect of shock threatened to overcome me, there was no time for that. I reasoned that they were just droids of some kind, though their liquid movements and expressions seemed utterly alive. I pulled out a small blaster that I'd brought for just such emergencies and shot the nightmare effigy, but to no apparent effect. It continued moving towards us with an open mouth and outstretched arms.

Meanwhile, my chromium-plated troublemaker burst forth with a lengthy sentence in the ancient tongue. The shrieking ceased at once, and the monster withdrew. The heads of the twelve statues now turned to the droid. One asked a question. Cuenyne altered the glottological variance of the ancient language he used previously to more accurately represent their speech in response. Then another spoke, and another, until all twelve had done so. It was an eerie thing to hear a language of such terrible antiquity being spoken, probably for the first time in tens of thousands of years, by the effigies of ancient, arcane entities.

"What are they saying?" I whispered, my curiosity getting the better of me. Cuenyne turned to me in apparent reproach but didn't respond.

The hand of the nearest statue stretched to point at a section of the wall. At the risk of violating some unknown, archaic edict, I followed its direction and gently pushed against the pictograph-carved panel. The remaining statues droned a long abyssal sound in unison.

Without warning, the lights went out.

In that terrifying flicker, I found myself in another corridor. It was illuminated once more in blue and red. Cuenyne suddenly appeared. Whispering softly at first, he said, "I don't think we'll be penalized again for speaking Basic."

When nothing happened, he continued in a normal tone. "Only the original tongue was permitted there so that any who arrived who were not of the First Ones would be barred. I was able to convince them that I'd traveled from abroad on a mission to preserve their ancient records."

"And that worked?"

"They likely scanned me to see that I didn't have much in the way of weapons, at least of a kind they could recognize, and didn't pose a threat."

"What about me?" I asked, concerned. "I had a weapon. Aren't I a threat?"

"I know this might hurt your pride, but I think they saw you as my bodyguard."

"Reduced to a bodyguard," I said in mock disappointment. "What else did they say?"

"That's a longer conversation, but the short of it is that they represent twelve Elder Races who submitted to the temptations of the Queen of Air and Darkness," Cuenyne revealed, "and no longer exist… They were expressing their regret."

"This is a *strange* place we've come to…"

"You're only realizing that now?"

"Was that just a transportation device we went through?"

"A teleportal," Cuenyne related, "and a highly advanced one, judging by the smoothness of the transition."

Traversing a long and sloping corridor, we came upon a large room empty of all adornments, save for a number of large monitors built into the walls. A giant dais at the rear of the sweeping chamber held a huge mechanism. The upper portion was dominated by a large, curved, transparisteel dome. The dais was dime and the dome was unlit. Though not as gargantuan as Mistress Mnemos, it was clearly an advanced technological achievement, and it occurred to me that we'd found the remnant of the Osserians… Unfortunately, like its counterpart on Osseria, it too seemed to be dead.

I began to reproach myself for making such a foolish excursion that would likely mean our end in this alien tomb, but then I had a thought. "Cuenyne, do you think you could… I don't know, wake it up?"

Cuenyne hovered over to it. "You don't suppose there's an *on* switch?" He floated back and forth. But after a few moments with no successful response, he added, "I don't suppose it could hurt to give her a nudge." He pulled out his interface arm, preparing to plug himself in.

"What do you think you're doing?!" An enraged, tall woman stalked into the room. She was striking, with lengthy brunette hair that fell down to her knees. It was all that covered her lithe form, which was as that of a dancer… or a professional killer. "You have come to destroy the Watcher!" she bellowed.

"No, we haven't," I replied firmly and quickly.

"Then you are pillagers and thieves!" The accusation held no room for doubt. "None but the destroyers and the doomed have ever attempted to penetrate our inner sanctum. I shall hasten your deaths…"

And with that declaration, she opened her mouth wide, too wide. Tilting her head back, she reached into her mouth and pulled out her tongue, which turned out to be the handle of a long, silvery, glowing whip.

"We've come to find the Osserians!" I said quickly.

The deadly android stopped, bemused. She replaced the sharp tongue-whip back into her mouth. "You should speak to Mother of this. Yet, she will not like being awakened after such a sweet sleep. I think perhaps I should kill you instead."

"We've brought important information," I added. "You wouldn't deny her that?"

"I would if it would spare her pain," she said. "Do you bring her pain?"

"No, only knowledge."

"That is the worst kind of pain. But I will let Mother decide. She will choose a suitable fate for you." At that, she grasped her head firmly with both hands, swiveled, and pulled it off her body. Carrying the head under one arm, she walked over to her *mother*, which Cuenyne had wisely backed away from (though that didn't stop her from shooting him a murderous glare), and planted it in a small circular depression.

The eyes of the head awoke in rubicund, cyclamen, and aureolin tincts. In turn, illumination flickered on the massive mainframe, emerging across its surface like white spots in a parhelic circle. Before long, a skull-like face formed on the transparisteel window. It was not a face of welcome.

The voice was slightly feminine, stately, but with a weary, metallic tremolo. "Who dares intrude on my age-old slumber?!" she boomed in Basic. Amber and saffron lights beamed from her across the room.

"We have…" I stammered, "come from Osseria to Otherspace to find—"

"Osseria!" she interrupted. "It seems as if a thousand ages have passed since the name of our ancestral home has been uttered in this forsaken place… A Human… and a droid… You are not a model I recognize. Constructed more recently… clever of make. Quickly then, tell me who you are and what your purpose is before I send my servitors to *unmake* you."

"You promised the next ones to me, Mother!" the head of the starry-eyed woman complained.

"Oh… umm," I faltered, desperate not to seem guilty of whatever might offend her. "My name is Arhul Hextrophon. This is Cuenyne. We're here as historians to learn… uh, are you related to the Keeper?"

"I am called the Watcher of Osseria II," the supercomputer intoned, her voice softening to become more approachable and less *all-powerful*, "known as Archon-Ood

by the old Osserians. The Keeper of Osseria was my eldest sister, Asmoth-Yor, who was fashioned in the Earliest Days of Skyriver. It was my signal that summoned you here… to be tested… and upon failing, destroyed."

"But we *passed*?" I asked hopefully.

"There are many imposters in the worlds. I do not believe you are one, but you will likely die nonetheless, though not at my hands."

"Uh, ok, well, we've come a long way and have a few questions. If you can help us with some answers, we'd be happy to leave in peace."

"*If it is peace you value, you would never have come here*!"

"How is it you speak Basic?" Cuenyne interjected. "The Galactic Standard wasn't established until around over fifteen thousand years ago, which I assume would have been some years after you arrived."

"A complicated story that will take time to tell," Archon-Ood responded. "Let us just say that I know much of the history of your galaxy. You have seen that our *new* home is protected, and language is but one of the means to ensure that our adversaries do not infiltrate us unawares, for nearly all have forgotten the ancient tongue of the Precursors."

"Then I'm glad Cuenyne learned it," I gulped.

"You would be dead otherwise," she rejoined ominously.

"Look, another reason we've come is to tell you that Osseria is safe to return to. So if any of your people are yet alive, we can lead you back there…"

"You are not the first to offer to lead the Osserians to greener pastures," the Watcher stated enigmatically as the lights in the room swirled to jade and cinnabar hues. "But you are too late to save them."

"I am sorry to hear that. Perhaps you might tell us what happened…"

"*Betrayal!*" the Watcher rumbled as her many lights turned a piercing red. Then softening her tone, she added, "We were abducted and brought to this forsaken prison. It was not a terrible existence but a bleak one; we missed our beautiful world and e'er longed to return to it."

"Certainly, there's some remnant somewhere…" But I grew suspicious and began to wonder. What if they'd all been murdered by this mad Archon or her grotesque *daughter*? Perhaps her internal hardware had begun to corrode and she'd gone insane like the feral droids from the Factory District of Coruscant.

But it was Cuenyne who explained: "The Osserians became infertile, didn't they? It could have been the trauma of capture and exile, exposure to radiation, or living underground without natural air or sunlight, but without the ability to reproduce, they would have simply died out."

The Watcher sat silent for a few moments before the head of her daughter—still attached to the mainframe—spoke: "They have caused you grief, Mother. I shall slay them now so that you may return to your blissful slumber."

"No, daughter," the Watcher sighed. "Not all remembrances come to grief and not all griefs are bad. It has been a long time since I told the old stories. I had enjoyed it at one time, especially with the young, and these two are very young.

"But you must be hungry and thirsty… Areana, procure refreshments."

The strange and hostile android-head circled around to stare at us for a moment, as if deciding whether she needed her mother's permission to kill us. But she replaced the head atop her body and disappeared into another room.

"And put some clothes on! We have guests!" she called after her. "You must not hold my childrens' vigilance against them," the Watcher said. "They care only for my well-being, and Areana is the severest of them all. Do you have children of your own, Arhul Hextrophon?"

"No, I'm afraid not, though Cuenyne here displays similar insolence."

Cuenyne retorted with a rude noise. The Watcher's screen lit in a variety of soft colors, which I took to indicate laughter. She reminded me of Mistress Mnemos in some ways, except that she wouldn't hesitate to kill us if it struck her fancy. Areana soon returned with a stool and a plate of unusual-looking fruits, steaming vegetables, and a decanter of wine, which I surmised was another feat of the Watcher's. It wasn't Garham's-on-the-Downstream, but it wasn't bad.

"My sister and I were created by the Osserians to amplify their natural abilities to induce the geothermal, solar, and lunar powers to strengthen their respective systems so that they could, together, withstand attacks from the Enemy."

Odd phrasing, I thought as I sampled and gulped down one of the odd-shaped tubers that must have been derived from whatever root varietals grew down here. I didn't feel unduly anxious that they'd been poisoned. Had the Watcher wanted us dead, Areana would have seen to that, and I doubted that the mistrustful android would blatantly disobey her mother to act on her own volition. "After the War of Temporal Planes, we used our gifts to provide succor to the shattered galaxy and began to construct sapient lifeforms, what some might call androids, though they were much more than that. On Osseria, my sister fashioned four in the youthful forms of the incarnated Celestials to assist her and keep her company. I imagine they've become quite feral by now… To further protect Osseria from occupation, she fashioned lower-lifeforms as well—creatures of great strength to serve as guardians."

"We met a few," I said, recalling the helpful Karina. "One was a two-headed Kima-Korrina. It was she who led us to your people's main city…"

"The chimeras are not of our origin," Archon-Ood interrupted. "They are rare, but they are but beasts. Intelligent, yes, but they do not speak or serve as guides!"

Cuenyne and I looked at each other, bewildered, but said nothing more.

"Are those *your* champions we saw out there?" I asked, pointing idiotically to the general direction of where we'd come.

"Do you like my Stone Sentinels?" the Watcher perked up. "I pursued a similar course on this world, what we came to call Osseria II but which had other names at other times. They stand watch in the Hall of Remembrance to ensure the protection of our most precious possession: our history."

"They're absolutely terrifying!" I admitted, and the Watcher laughed again.

"Why bother with an HRD if you have them?" Cuenyne asked of Areana.

The Watcher made a dismissive sound. "In the early days of robotics, after the Oblation of Pithem but aeons before Admiral Massad Thrumble designed what you call the HRD line, there were androids, replicants, mandroids, gynoids, silicates, and simuloids, to list a few of your crude designs. As for Areana, her job is to protect me, but mainly she's a companion. The Sentinels are more akin to the beasts you met on Osseria… but here, in such a realm as this, they needed to be *stronger*."

"What do they do when there's nothing to protect you from?" I asked.

"Why, they play, of course! Would you like to see?"

That would be a sight, though a bit nightmarish for my tastes. "Thank you, but perhaps another time." Her vibrant lights lit up like a Life Day tree.

"Mistress Ood, did the Osserians evolve on Osseria?" Cuenyne asked, getting back to the matter at hand.

"You have studied Osseria. How is it you do not know?" she asked, clearly puzzled.

"There's *a lot* we don't know," I acknowledged. "Although beautiful, we only had a limited time to spend there."

"It was even more beautiful long ago," began the Watcher, "as were all the worlds of the galaxy. We do not have much time, but if you are willing to take the risk, I will tell you what I can of the ancient and forgotten days."

"Please do!" I encouraged.

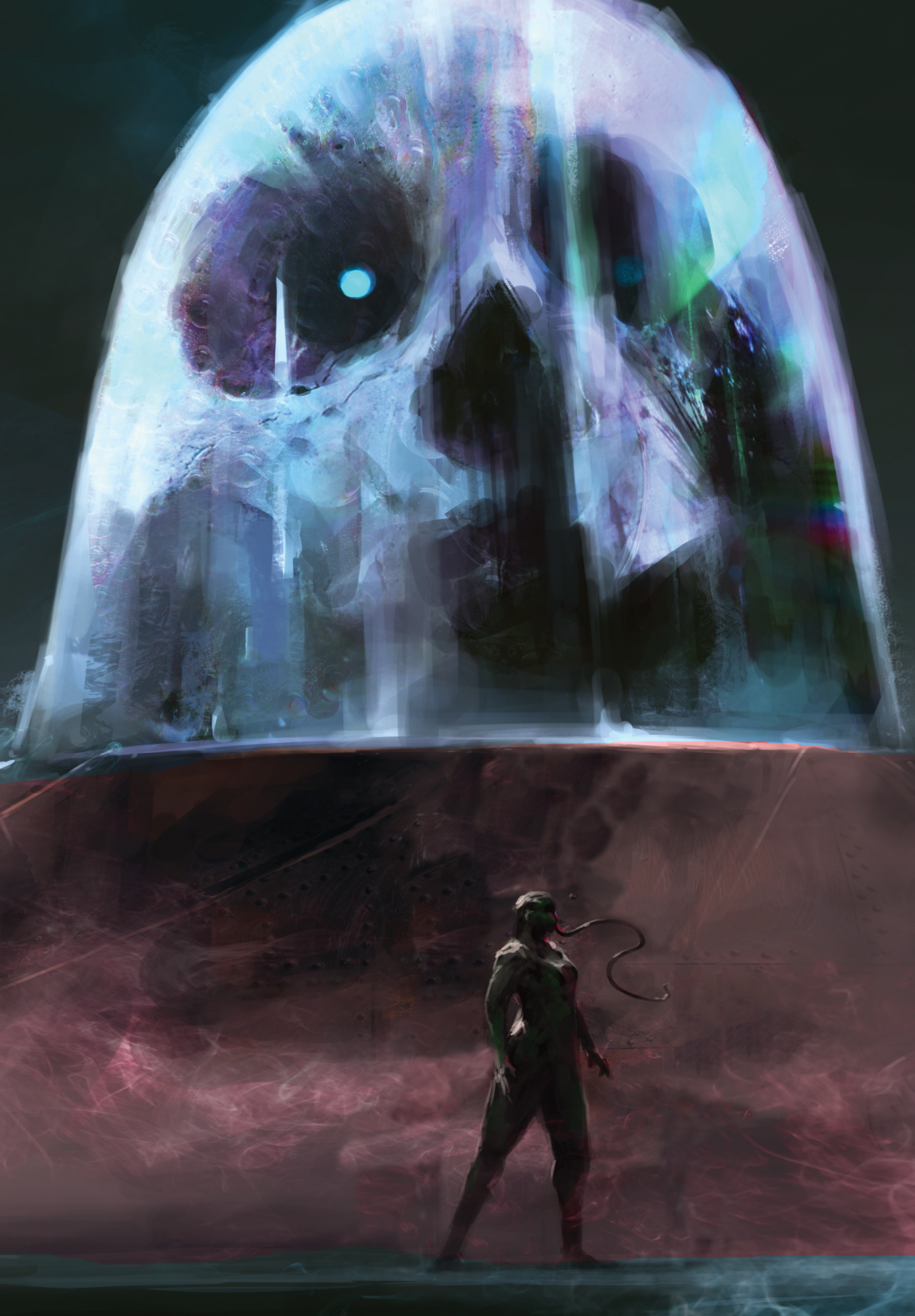
"Risk what?" Cuenyne blurted at the same time.

"Torture, insanity, and death, of course. Certainly, you understand that this is *their* realm. Rare are those who come to Illathurion who ever again leave!"

To his credit, Cuenyne remained silent, though I could see by the way he looked at me that he wasn't happy. Whatever hyperbolic terrors Archon-Ood believed were out there, we hadn't traveled this far just to turn around and go home. If such things actually existed (and of that I remained uncertain), there was no guarantee that our immediate departure would ensure our safety. And had we truly been concerned about *that*, we'd never have come in the first place.

"We've visited other worlds in Otherspace before we found this one," I explained. "They were inexplicably bizarre and dangerous, but there was nothing that would have us abandon our quest. It's worth the risk if you're willing to talk to us."

"*Those* worlds were likely not being watched! But so be it. You have but a short time before they discover your whereabouts, and when they do, you will suffer horrors such as few have ever known!"



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KEEPER OF THE SECRETS

Correspondent to the chronicle that unfolded, Archon Ood projected images across her screen; some lingered, some passed by quickly; all were arresting in the scope of their beauty or magnitude of dread. "It was a time like no other… The Osserians were of the Firstborn, created by the Celestials at the start of the Golden Age at the dawn of Skyriver's Vernal Splendour. Known also as the Precursors, Progenitors, Forefathers, Ancients, and First Ones, they were endowed with exceptional gifts. The particular gift of the Osserians was their ability to terraform. The Elder Races worked together then, travelling the galaxy through the many gates, aiding one another in friendship and love…"

"You mentioned some kind of conflict," Cuenyne asked when she lapsed into silence. "Was this the reason your people and others fled or went into hiding?"

"The Cosmic Wars, or, as some called it, the Great Madness, the Shadows, and the Ceaseless War, were made up of three terrible conflicts that marked the end of a great and glorious period and the breaking of the ancient pact. Long years had passed since the Second Shadow, what is more commonly known as the War of Temporal Planes. Wonders had been achieved during that time to restore much of the broken galaxy. We had naïvely believed it had been an aberration, but that was no more true than a wish, a dream that better days were upon us, that the Restoration long ago promised had come to pass or, profanely, was no longer required. Then, as the eyes of the Ecothom blazed in the black night sky, heralding doom, we received warning that the Old Ones had returned and were searching for the Firstborn. Others were stirring too, oppressive races overcome by the mad promise of dominion. We who had seen the horrors that violence, slavery, and destruction wrought knew better than to again take part in them. So it was that many of the First Ones began preparations to depart our beloved homeworlds. The Osserians left behind the Keeper and her champions to protect our world, while I was created to protect the Osserians until we could safely return one day. Several chose a similar course; some made their systems difficult to find or dangerous to enter; and some charted unknown stars, such as the Zeffonians, to find the Transdimensional Gates that crossed into the Unseen Realm of the Celestials, which has been called Elysia and Glyu-Vho…"[7]

"Pardon me," I interrupted. "I don't process information quite as quickly as Cuenyne does. Transdimensional Gates?"

[7] Glyu-vho (or Glyu-uho) is a name that derives from the barely-known Celestial language, from the words, *gly* or *gilih* ("equal") *vhod* ("gate").

"The Watcher has an organic adapter," Cuenyne noted. "Assuming she'd permit it, I suspect you could download her memories and knowledge directly."

"Uh, that sounds dangerous," I blurted.

"It was designed for our sister races. I'm afraid that in your present form, your brain would be unable to handle the influx of information; your mind would… *crack*. I've seen it happen to one would-be usurper."

"I see," I replied, aghast. "Best we avoid that, then!"

"How is it that we haven't taken over the universe?" Cuenyne scoffed.

"There were three basic kinds of transportation portals at the beginning," the Watcher explained. "The first is the rarest; they are the Transdimensional Gates. These were first made for the Celestials, allowing the Whills, Diathim, and Ones to enter into our realm at the beginning, providing passage between the Primary, Secondary, and Unseen Realms. Lesser gates permitted passage between two or more different Secondary Realms. Skyriver is one such realm…"

"So I can't just fly my ship out of the galaxy?" I asked.

"Dimensions are generally self-contained; vortices and eddies surround them. Only through a Transdimensional Portal could you *fly out*."

Dr. Insmot Bowen had postulated the idea of a Hyperspace Barrier. He'd be pleased to get confirmation of it.

"The second of the gates," she continued, "and the most common, are the interstellar gates. Some are organic like the wormhole through which you arrived in Illathurion. The oldest constructed Jumpgates were the World Gates, or Wells of the Worlds, but the Gree Hypergates were the most ubiquitous throughout the galaxy, a network stretching across the cosmos. Later came the Grand Hypergates, Molecular Transporters, Infinity Gates, Ark portals, Warp stations, and others. In the beginning, all of the inhabited worlds had one or another. They provided a holographic map of the galaxy with which travelers could choose regions, sectors, systems, and worlds; once a world was selected, you could simply pass through to the gate on the other side. To ensure the users' atmospheric requirements existed, *Types* were designated for this purpose and marked so as to prevent accidents and so that provisions could be acquired to allow one to breathe in such environments."

"And these Gree Hypergates, they're similar to the Kwa's Infinity Gates?"

"Only in that both are interstellar gates. Hypergates create a temporary wormhole to allow safe passage across the galaxy. Infinity Gates utilize a small pocket dimension within a Star Chamber which sends travelers in a burst of enclosed energy to another Star Chamber. Several of the variants later built were engineered on the designs of these, with some placed in space to allow the passage of larger vessels. Yet, there is a gate more powerful still, the third and most interesting and unlike all others. It is called by several names, but we called it the Steward's Gate. It is the least known and yet most significant, referred to only in myths, legends, and sacred texts."

"Ok…" I said, a hundred questions popping into my mind, "but just so we're on the same page, you earlier mentioned the Whills, Diathim, and Ones. There's considerable mystery surrounding their identities. How do *you* define them?"

"These are concepts that are not so easy for modern sapients to comprehend, having limited your study to the workings of the material plane."

That was another odd statement, and one I couldn't let go of. "Pardon me, but that seems somewhat ironic of you to say, given that you're a product of that."

"That is where you are wrong, Arhul Hextrophon."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. Had she, during all these millennia, come to believe she was *alive*? Droid insanity was not unheard of. "I don't quite understand."

"Good! Then you are on the path to enlightenment. My sister and I were not merely the products of science and technology—as you assume. We were the products of love and wisdom as implemented by the *tools* of science and technology… and by what some might call magic but is more accurately understood as the manifestation of the Force, for that is what the Progenitors' powers were. Suffice it to say that science and magic were intended to serve love and wisdom—not work in opposition to them or each other, as they have ever since the end of the Cosmic Wars."

"I think I understand," I acknowledged.

"No, you do not," she said. "Due to your cultural limitations, centuries of indoctrination, and dogma masquerading as reason, it will be difficult to comprehend much of what I am saying from a single conversation alone. But I believe Cuenyne will come to aid you in this…"

With that cue, Cuenyne reminded them of the topic at hand… "You were going to tell us about the Whills, Diathim, and Ones."

"All life comes from the Supreme Maker, what the Jedi have at times portrayed as the Cosmic Force, whom the Sunesi call Mungul, the Tuhgri call the Great Creator, and the Lurmen Katurrans call Fossah, which means 'Father.' I speak of the Father of Lights, the One Above All, the Supreme Maker, the Weaver at the Loom—He, in turn, serves and is served by the flourishing of life and love…" When I did not interrupt, astounded and deeply dubious of what she was saying, she continued. "Part of the Imperishable Fire created by the Cosmic Force, the Whills are advanced microscopic lifeforms who direct the Midichlorians in each living cell to split. This brings forth the energy field known as the Living Force which, in turn, generates more life, sustaining the Whills who communicate a beneficent purpose to each living being through the whisperings of the Midichlorians within. It is this cooperative symbiosis—what one would call love—that is at the heart of life and the universe. As organisms die, they return to the Cosmic Force…"

"So you're saying there's this *all-powerful* Maker who made everything, but at death our personalities cease to be and our *energy* carries on!?" I argued, sounding more caustic than I'd intended. "That's rubbish!"

Cuenyne whistled but otherwise stayed silent. I'd been taught to respect the beliefs of others, but I hadn't come all this way to hear exasperating clichés and self-righteous Solomonite creeds from some dusty, glorified calculator that had been sitting in a hole for thousands of years.

"That is *not* what I said," she corrected, as annoyed with me as I was with her, "Though it is what the Jedi taught, they did not have the full picture nor comprehend the mind and heart of the Cosmic Force. *We do not cease to be*, Arhul Hextrophon."

"Oh, alright, fine…" I sighed, realizing I'd jumped to a wrong conclusion and been uncharacteristically harsh. It didn't matter. Hoary religious beliefs, like philosophy, had their place but shouldn't be confused with science and facts.

"So, how do the Celestials fit into all this?" Cuenyne asked. I glared at him, but he ignored me. Of course, I had to get stuck with a droid who had distinctly contrarian views to mine.

The Watcher's voice took on a tone like one of my old teachers who seemed perpetually choleric over the poor state of education in the galaxy. "It is troubling to hear that your people have fallen so far down the same pit of ignorance and confusion that your predecessors fell into. I suppose you are not to blame. When the Empyrean Wars erupted, truth was the first fatality. The Celestials are the Celestials. No words in Basic quite convey the meaning. They are the Gardeners and the *true* Builders and Architects of this realm—though they are not known as such, save by a few. As the earliest servants of the Cosmic Force in this realm, some have called them the Beings of Unimaginable Light, Quantum Mechanics, Astral Deities, or Elder Gods, though they spurn worship. In the most ancient tongues, the Celestials were known at various times as the Eryn, the Malak'im, the Bene-elyon, the Ággelos, Those Who Dwell Beyond the Veil… They are divided into two groups. The Osiarch are the four who first conceived of Skyriver, or *Samûnaru*, as it was called in their tongue. The Valdilar are their helpers, and they are sometimes called Agioiy when contrasted to the fallen Malevoiy."

"That doesn't help much, I'm afraid." I concealed my grimace, uncertain if the old supercomputer was going out of its way to make me feel foolish or if it had just been programmed for superstition.

"They are beings of spirit, Messengers of the One, Guardians of the Dawn, referred to in times past as the Great Beings of Light, Suns of Light, the First Stars, and the Council of the Divine…"

"*Angels*?" I scoffed, unable to help myself and annoyed that this was the best she could do. Here was the most advanced artificial intelligence ever created until the BRT line, and she was exhorting the hoariest of fables.

"You may balk at the old names, but they accurately serve as shorthand for complex concepts. Since they offend your sensibilities, let us speak in the 'scientific' terms you understand. We will say that they are what you might call 'powerful and benevolent extradimensional entities.' Knowing they could better serve the galaxy and communicate the will of 'the Most Advanced Mind,' the Valdilar became the Diathim and Fāta. This was done in order to interact with physical beings on a lower plane of existence, to better serve as caretakers and guides—a task that became far more crucial after the arrival of your kind to this plane. The first of the Valdilar became the Ones, but this came about much later, for they were intended to restore the balance that was lost during the early Cosmic Wars…"

"You mentioned *Old Ones*?" Cuenyne asked.

"They and the monstrosities they spawned are the profane monarchs of this realm. The Architects foolishly brought them forth in the Empyrean Wars."

"I suppose I know who the Architects are—" I started.

"You don't. Great stores of knowledge were lost or destroyed during the long wars, replaced by facsimiles of truth. Those who adopted that title stood in opposition to the Celestials. Many worshipped them as gods… but there were other, far darker forces at work at this time, diabolic entities with sundry names who operated from the shadows of a counterworld that breached the transdimensional walls."

"It is times like these that I'm glad I don't dream," Cuenyne said.

"To be perfectly frank, I'm less interested in the myths of your people than their actual history," I suggested, trying to be diplomatic. "All this business of gods and demons is really beside the matter at hand."

"You are incorrect," she declared. "They *are* the matter at hand!"

"She may have a point about Human comprehension, Hex," teased Cuenyne, causing even Areana to bark a mirthless laugh.

"Very amusing, picking on the sole Human in the room," I groused. "It's just that these ideas sound very similar to the Solomonite beliefs of the Srrors'tok."

"Not just the Srrors'tok," Archon Ood amended. "Before polytheism took hold, those beliefs were shared by many of the great Grimalkin races: the Agasami, B'trillan, Cantrosian, Aaroun, Catumen (and their Schenor offshoot), Palmien, Horansi, Pursian, Moorjhoni, F'krrrer, Orryxian, Ventrexian, Souma, Tinnell, Togorians, Trianii (and their Ronzo offshoot), and the Felin, who are also known as the Felinid and Felinian."

"Now, that's just showing off," I griped.

"Only some of these are offspring races of the Firstborn Cathar, but most were so fascinated by the other, they formed a loose collective. As to the Fras, Farghul, Barathax, and Zygerrian, they bowed to the arcane powers of the Enemy. But felinoids are just the tip of the iceberg. Jedi Consular Ovair is one of the more famous members of his order who helped resurrect the old Solomonite beliefs. So was Syas Broji—"

"*Saint* Syas, *the crank?* Didn't he set up a religious retreat on… Zota?" I asked.

"Zotakh," Cuenyne corrected. "The vanished Zendar said their world was a—"

"A locus for the Force," the Watcher finished, "and so it is, one of several."

None of this was adding up, and it was time for some clarification: "Given that you and your people have been hidden here for… well, a long time, I don't understand how it is you know modern galactic history. *The Godform Assumption* is a Sith grimoire based on the older *Epic of Solomon* written by… Ho Jinn Molt, I believe."

"And is itself but a poetic retelling of a Cathar religious work," she rejoined as if to remind me never to play chess with a supercomputer. "Yes, I am getting to your question!" a dizzying array of polychromatic lights flashed.

"Please don't take offence, Mistress Ood," I said deferentially, taking a deep breath. "It's just that we've come across numerous ancient histories in our travels, most of which are complex, contradictory, and often confused with fact."

"What Hex is trying to say," Cuenyne decoded, "is that you may be, without realizing it, conflating your people's religious beliefs with historical events."

The Watcher sighed as her panel and screen lights pulsed with shades of blue, grey, and white. "Understand that the Cathar and the Osserians were not as the Asogians, brilliant but lost in reverie; nor as the Killiks, damaged by the ancient Dark Nest; nor as the Sharu, terrified and guilt-ridden. Nor were they as the El'gusclar-fal'Mörtilspí, who came to be known as the Cocytans of Cocytus, a name bestowed on them by the Humans who rescued them, for they rejected their past after the deaths of their elders. The Osserians kept their knowledge *untainted* by the cultural myths that arose in the universe after the coming of Man. This noble and tragic history has been deemed legends by they who have forgotten, reviled, or distorted the ancient past, *but that does not make it so!*"

"If I understand you correctly, you're saying that there were all these godlike spirit-beings running around." Since they insisted on discussing it, I might as well inject some reason into the conversation. "If so, where are they all? I mean, if they made *all this* and are as *powerful* as you say they are, why has the galaxy fallen into war time and again? Why would they just sit back and watch when they're needed the most?"

"Because most would not impose their will on others or take a life."

"*Most*… So some did?"

"Yes, I refer to those fallen to shadow or drowned in darkness. Valdilar became Malevoiy and Yvala; Diathim became the Maelibi; Son became the Malevolum, in opposition to Daughter, who became Morai. The Titans faltered. Even some of the Fāta turned, manifesting as the Fairfolk. And a few *went native*… such as the Trans-uranae, benign but no longer entirely sane. Of those who stayed true, they did not just '*sit back and watch*,' as you say, but they could not remain in a galaxy that had rejected them for malevolent gods, repudiated wise laws for cruel traditions, exchanged peaceable kingdoms for dark empires, relinquished truth for falsehoods. The galaxy splintered over the decisions the Precursors and their offspring made, the choices that placed them in a constant clash of violence. This period was called the Grieving. But those that remained reached out to any who might listen and learn, for the Celestials were not without hope, and contingency plans were brought forth to ensure the continuance of life and preservation of compassion and truth until the time came for the prophecy to come to pass… That is very likely why *you* are here!"

"Yeah, I don't know about *that*," I returned. "It's a lot to take in, and without hard facts, it's little more than a pious overlay of history." I didn't want to be close-minded, but I was feeling overwhelmed by the pervasiveness of the concepts and their implications, though it struck me then that they were not too dissimilar to my earlier hypothesis about patterns. "You said, *'Primary World?'* So, assuming you heard us earlier, our interpretation of the four pillars was correct…"

"Partly. You tend to assume that one thing is either fully literal or fully symbolic and fail to see how a thing can be *both*. Understanding this will help you better discern matters."

"In our line of work, we've found that the former is often forgotten entirely and turned into the latter," Cuenyne countered, "as when the Naboo transformed Ashla, the personification of Light and Wisdom, into the moon goddess, Shiraya."

"Ah, but even in this a kernel of truth can be found," the Watcher replied. "Shiraya's aspect is borrowed from Ashla, but her form was taken from the Wing'd Goddess, who is based on Niphal, the ancient Celestial, who should not be conflated with the Winged Goddess of the Nightsisters, who is Harla, the Cloaked Goddess and Dread Mother… There is much I would teach you, but little time to do so. This dimension, the galaxy you dwell in, is but one of many unique realms that spring like branches off a single enormous tree. The experience of one is not the same experience as that of another or of the parent tree, nor do they grow at the same rate. Time does not run the same here as it does in other realms or in the Primary Dimension. Your people have never had a great understanding of these matters, but when factoring in the existence of great or inverse time dilation due to naturally occurring phenomena or Celestial artifacts, it is no surprise that most have made erroneous conclusions regarding dates and times. Suffice to say that you are far younger and less advanced than you've envisioned yourselves to be!"

"I suppose this might explain your time-travel theory, Hex," stated Cuenyne.

"Or a multiverse," I added.

The Watcher made a sound equivalent to a *harrumph*. "Is it not enough for the learned men of your world to see billions suffering that they must imagine infinite sufferers? Is it not enough to have one or two Palpatines that they must conjure up an endless variety of them with endless ways of tormenting the galaxy? To explain a universe too fine-tuned on too many dials, they envision a grand *universe-making machine* that sets infinite dials for infinite worlds. Ah, the folly of lesser minds paraded as intellect, disguising fantasy as fact!"

"You would get along well with Mistress Mnemos," I said with a smirk. "Wait! What do you mean, 'one or *two* Palpatines'?"

"Mere hyperbole to make a point…"

"Archon-Ood," Cuenyne said stiffly, "in the short time in which we've known one another, I have never heard you resort to exaggeration. What aren't you telling us?"

"Very well. Perhaps the galaxy has matured enough to know the truth… In secondary dimensions, such as ours, things are more malleable and elastic, allowing that which would normally not be possible to come into being. Nevertheless, the Celestials wisely placed mechanisms outside of time and space in which to maintain stability. They appear different in different places and times; some are as observatories with windows into the past; some are as woods between and beyond realms, with pools that act as portals to different spheres. From these worlds between worlds, time and space might be breached, but it is a gravely unsound course; even the Celestials do not embark upon it. Of course, Humans seem to be continually trying!"

"It's our nature to explore," I defended, somewhat irrationally since I knew from experience there was no winning an argument with one who saw herself as smarter than all other lifeforms.

"To explore without knowledge or wisdom is the way one gets lost," she rebutted.

"It's not much of an exploration if you know where you're going," I snapped back.

Archon-Ood flashed in crimson shades. Even Areana bristled and stood up as if gearing for battle. "Obstinate and obdurate, as are all your kind! It is not mere starvation or dehydration of which I speak! To find oneself lost in the unlit spaces is a fate worse than privation and death!"

"You mean, like where we are now…"

Her colors muted and returned to twinkling shades of yellow, chrysoprase, and blue. Areana relaxed again, visibly disappointed. "You are not lost, Arhul Hextrophon, but found! The otherworlds can be realms of good or evil. Here are paths to places strange beyond imagining and, yes, even some that are not governed entirely by iniquity. Fortunately for most, the loathsome entities that roam this dimension are at odds with one another, else the galaxy would have been snuffed out long before. But should that inspire you to explore further, know that there are beings even worse than they—*black minds of the netherworld* who seek only to smother all light and life… and the eyes of their emissaries are ever roaming!"

"So, these *otherworlds* are accessible from our galaxy?" Cuenyne asked, more concerned with cosmology than demonology.

"Some… through portals. The largest of these is an analogue of Skyriver that is known by its caretakers as Hyperion, the cognomen given to the Echo Dimension. It was first fashioned by one of the Architects who also crafted Apeiron, which is the Infinity Realm, formed to test out temporal turbulences in a containment of uncharted spheres, including some that are, but are not, and yet are no more."

"Well, that's not *too* confusing!" I remarked.

"The otherworlds include the Ethereal Lands of Aenir, created by another of the Architects, Oneirichor, Corundum, and Frivoli, which are all connected and difficult to reach. Then there are the Hidden Worlds of Vitae, Mortis, Katurrah, and a planet so hidden that they dare not give it a name, inhabited by diminutive green-skinned Firstborn who would guide the Chosen of each generation along the Celestial path. These should not be conflated with the Sacred Worlds of Isorropía, Angorathea, Ravaath, and Andowyne, from which the Celestials first alighted on Skyriver. Of the Secret Places, there is Apeiron, Hyperion, and the Companions; Elysia predates all of these, situated deep within the Circle of the Spirit bordering the Primary Dimension."

"Sacred worlds, hidden realms… Next, you'll be saying there are *Enchanted Lands*," I remarked caustically, shaking my head.

"*All* the worlds of Skyriver were enchanted in the Earliest Days…"

"Well, I suppose that makes some kind of sense… But how is what you're telling us *not* a multiverse?"

"As there are many Celestials, there are many universes; they are *not* infinite duplicates of the same thing but are as different and unique as stories in a library. If each living being is unique, how much more so would a galaxy be? Even if a being is cloned, and the clone bears all the marks of the original, he is yet a separate and unique being."

"I hadn't thought of it that way. But you just spoke of an Infinity Realm and some sort of parallel dimension."

"Whether by intent or accident, it matters not; they are each unique; the claim that all possible quantum outcomes are physically realized is absurd. If I had Areana lop off your head, it would not inaugurate a new universe in which she didn't."

"May we test out that hypothesis, Mother?" the android asked with a vicious smile.

"However," the Watcher continued, not paying her any mind, "I will concede that I have heard of at least two universes far beyond our own that contain incongruities that you might qualify as such… But the reasons for this are due to a lack of proper governance and balanced oversight. I have seen that the universes that are regularly breached have gone quite off the rails; some have been destroyed and un-destroyed, or recombined with their original, or were irrevocably splintered due to imprudence and indifference… Not every Celestial is wise, competent, or even *sane*."

"So, getting back to that Echo Universe you mentioned earlier, Hyperion, I think you said it was called, there's another version of Cuenyne and me running around?"

"Potentially, and in Apeiron as well," she admitted. "I've only attempted to pierce the veil once. It is *extremely* inadvisable to traverse temporal-spatial rifts."

"Worth noting," Cuenyne quipped.

As I was trying to digest and correlate all this, it came into my head to ask, "Does any of this explain how an Asogian during the Clone Wars traveled to a world in which our history was nothing more than a holodrama series?"

Archon-Ood's pastel illuminations shifted to stark, primary colors. "You're referring to Earth… *Stop!* I can hear your thoughts threatening to escape your mouth. There have been many Earths. Some took on different names after they joined the galactic community, such as Terra I, which became TerraAsta, and some did not survive. Most had their share of troubles, including this world."

"Which was?" I demanded.

"You have already surmised the answer to that."

After I picked my jaw back up, I said, "So *this world* is Urthha! Or *was*… so this is the original homeworld of Humans—"

"Arhul Hextrophon, you are getting ahead of yourself again! This and the other Earths of Skyriver, Apeiron, and Hyperion were named and fashioned after the one in the Primary World."

"You earlier mentioned a time dilation, but if that's true…" I started doing mental calculations, "the Prime Dimension would technically be… older? Younger?"

"Impossible to calculate," Cuenyne cut in. "Based on what Archon-Ood has told us, I surmise that time runs much faster here but not at a constant rate."

"That is my conclusion as well," she confirmed. "The end of the Vernal Splendour at the coming of the Cosmic Wars changed much. But we must table such *philosophical* matters for the time being and focus on the more immediate situation at hand."

"You were explaining how the Osserians ended up here," Cuenyne reminded.

"I will attempt to complete my tale; perhaps then you will better comprehend the larger picture. Your arrival has set events into motion; the imagers of the gloaming are even now stirring, bent on your destruction!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

FROM THE CRYPTS OF MEMORY

"What does *that* mean?" I demanded.

"Like unhallowed isles in a black and restless sea are the thousands of worlds that exist in Illathurion. Its very stars look down and glower. We on Urthha have remained concealed due to a powerful illusion I placed upon it to make it appear irradiated, but it is not. I lifted it when the *XS-Explorer* arrived, for I suspected your coming was part of a greater plan, but there is no doubt that the shadowy servitors of the Enemy have detected your presence. Now, at last do you understand that time is not on your side?"

"If we're part of some great plan—which I don't believe—then why did you nearly kill us?"

"*All* things must be tested."

"How much time do we have?" Cuenyne asked.

"I do not know, but they are not the only ones with eyes and ears in the stars. I will know when they approach."

"Since we have some time left, tell us what happened to your people…" I asked, hoping in this way to get some straight answers.

"Despite its occupation by the Enemy in the distant past, the Shimholt loved their homeworld. But with the looming threat of the Twilight Wars, Hathkhalid Sud, their ruler, knew they should prepare for evacuation. An expert astrogator, he claimed to know the ultimate destination of the Celestials. To reconnoiter for his own people, he offered to lead us there. We should not have believed him. It was a ruse. An armada awaited us and crippled our ships. We were transferred to slave vessels and led to this subterrene dungeon.

"We knew it was not in his character to have committed so grievous a sin, and in the long years that followed, we learned that he did so in exchange for keeping his own people safe. All of our supplies and tools were allowed us, and we were able to grow our own food. We were not harmed but were given a task with a warning attached to the failure of accomplishing it. All that the Night Queen required of us was to use our abilities to restore this planet from the devastation that its original inhabitants had wrought upon it.

"We began at once, but healing would prove no easy task, for the world and its primordial Archetypes were weary and insane, for they had taken part in the purge of the dominant race that once dwelt on the surface. While we sought to heal the Elementals, we explored our new underworld. From the information we'd uncovered, I began to learn more of this world's history. Urthha is riddled with passages of immemorial construction wherein lodge the remnants of survivors from ancient times who'd been

drawn down into these massive caverns. Some of these were the *Ghorii*. Grotesque ghouls akin to your Cthons, but older, bestial descendants of the Voormi civilization, they emerged from their bone-strewn hollows to wage war. Against their fetid factions, the Osserians prevailed, but others yet abide amidst the perpetually burning pillars of fire and massive black lakes that wind down to labyrinthine rivers and haunted grottos that even the Ghorii will not go. We transformed the tunnels of the great elemental slugs into a livable Osserian habitat and began recording our history and the history of the galaxy on the pillars and walls. We had not yet explored all the passageways when one day, by accident, we uncovered a hidden channel that led to an undiscovered territory. This was nearly our undoing, for there dwelt the *damned*. It was later, after horrid battles with these unnaturally animated armies were fought and won, that we discovered the real reason we'd been brought here. Upon a survey of the accursed enclave, there it stood, preserved for years too long to count: a lost Infinity Gate! The Star Chamber had been carefully concealed within storage vaults, forgotten over the aeons, save by those who ordered the construction of the edifice above."

"I don't understand," I admitted. "Wasn't this a way for your people to escape?"

"So it was initially hoped, but we knew better. Due to a late innovation, some of the Infinity Gates had been altered to function as not only transportation devices but superweapons that could target any location in the galaxy… In the dim past, at least one had been used to wipe out uncountable numbers in the ancient wars. Deadly radiation storms yet raged across Urthha's surface; scorching heat by day, glacial frost by night, and as resilient as the offspring of the Old Ones were, even they could not long inhabit such a world. We knew, of course, that once we'd rendered the lands habitable again, they would come, slaughter us, and use the Star Temple to hold the galaxy hostage. To prevent this from happening, we became the Guardians of the Gate. So long as we lived, none would ever use it as a weapon. We had constructed the Stone Sentinels in the image of the Elder Races to help battle the netherworld denizens and the brood of Illathurion, and so that they would know that it was the Firstborn that defeated them! We then turned to repair the gate so that at least some of our people could return to Osseria, after which we would destroy it. This task was made more urgent by the knowledge that the Night Queen was coming at last!"

"But no one ever came," I surmised. "Why didn't you all just leave?"

"Only then was the cruel irony of our situation revealed: while its Infinity Waves could target any world in the galaxy, the gate's transportation function was dependent on the existence of another Infinity Gate to act as a receiver. Yet, all the Star Temples which housed the gates had been buried or destroyed by the Kwa and their allies after they came into conflict with the Rakata. Even with the help of my sister on Osseria, it would take decades of searching each system to discover another like it, if any still existed, and decades more to return it to a functional state."

"And the Kwa disappeared from the galaxy," Cuenyne noted, "so you could not inquire of them."

"Yes. You know how the Sharu hid?" the Watcher asked.

"They used something they called *life orchards* to store their intelligence," I answered, "purposely making themselves into the primitive Toka to escape detection."

"Several followed this path, such as the Rethans and the Kwa; you know the latter as the Kwi."

"Huh! That seems like a cowardly move," I remarked.

"One might say that, but they'd be ignorant to," the Watcher responded. "They had been deceived by the Enemy on more than one occasion and struggled thereafter to make amends, to uplift the galaxy, to teach the Children of the Firstborn how to use the Force for the Light."

"Unfortunately, billions were enslaved during Rakatan rule," I said testily.

"Perhaps, but trillions were spared death because the conflicts were not escalated; because the Firstborn did not again feed the gods of destruction; because they recognized that as difficult as tyranny is to endure, it is better than the horror that visits all life in war, an evil so great that it tears apart the very fabric of the galaxy."

"I have to agree, Hex," offered Cuenyne. "War hasn't stamped out war; it's only increased it. It seems to me that most of the conflicts in the galaxy could have been solved far better through nonviolent means."

"The Alderaanians thought that too," I sneered.

"Alderaan might have been left alone had their Princess and Senatorial representative not been discovered to be the leaders of a violent terrorist group," Cuenyne offered. "Tarkin chose Alderaan as an example to punish them for hiding behind pacifism while engaging in insurrection."

"What other option do you think was available?" I asked hotly. "The Emperor and his agents were pathologically *evil*, and his supporters were so heavily indoctrinated, they could no longer tell right from wrong—thanks to the complicit newsnets."

"In this you speak truth, Arhul Hextrophon," Archon-Ood agreed.

"Look, I agree that violence should always be the last resort, but in this case, I see no other way to have achieved the greater good." It was a controversial subject. I had been part of that Alliance and still believed it to be a noble cause, even if I occasionally had doubts—what Cuenyne referred to as cognitive dissonance.

"The debate is as old as the earliest Humans," said the Watcher. "In the end, however, was it not a father's love for his son and a son's love for his father that stopped the Emperor and his Empire?"

"A situation that could only come about because that son, Luke Skywalker, had a Rebellion to join."

"Possibly… though I suspect the Force may have found another way to bring them together," Archon-Ood offered.

"Or the Rebellion *was* the means the Force used."

"Also possible. We are not going to resolve this today. Time is against us, and we must move on. Many years later, the Osserians came to realize they would never return to their mother world. While the search for the Star Temples continued, most began to channel their energies elsewhere. The Osserians went on with their lives, even exploring the surface from time to time. I was able to transport them back and

forth as they wished, but they refused to inhabit the outer surface in fear of being caught unawares… The years went by. Most were grateful in the knowledge that the horrors we feared had somehow been averted. So too Osseria, in our home galaxy, was safe for the time… And we knew peace. Ages passed, and the Osserians passed. As the Great Poet of the Primary World wrote:

> And one by one we died and were lost in the dust of accumulated time. We knew the years as a passing of shadows, and death itself as the yielding of twilight unto night.

"Despite the great divide between us, the Keeper and I continuously sent hyperwave messages across the dimensional divide. *That* is how I know so much about your world. Such knowledge was put towards what we called *the Great Plan*, which we'd hoped might usher in the fulfilment of the Prophecy of Restoration. Then, one day, thirty-five years ago, I felt her die. Asmoth-Yor was destroyed by orbital bombardment from an Imperial warship."

"We were sorry to learn of it," offered Cuenyne.

"The Empire must have discovered that unknown agents on the planet had provided succor to the two famous freedom-fighters," she added, "Luke and Leia Skywalker, who had accidentally landed on Osseria. My sister knew there would be a price to pay for aiding them, but she also knew that it was her duty. Though the siblings did not know it, the Keeper and her Children recognized that they were special, the key to a *greater plan*, and endowed them with the gifts of the Osserians, amplifying their natural abilities in the Force. So that the Empire might not return and our efforts towards the Great Plan could continue, she created a ruse—not unlike my own—which made the planet seem like a death-trap.

"But her Children had made a critical error in displaying their powers in front of the Imperial invaders, and all it took was one survivor to report it. Word reached the ears of the Emperor, who realized that that kind of power could only come from hidden Force users or one of the Elder Races. Either was a threat. And, indeed, had the Great Plan proved successful, the extant First Ones would have been awakened and the Empire and its Emperor defeated! Alas, it was not to be… The Empire returned. With time, Asmoth-Yor could have enhanced her defensive capabilities to withstand such an attack, but she had not anticipated that Sidious himself would come to ensure that absolute destruction was carried out. The attack came just as she was identifying a trail to what she believed was an extant Star Temple. It was not a swift assault, taking the unleashed power of several bombardments to finally penetrate her defenses. Her last thoughts before her life-force winked out were of regret that she had been unable to locate an Infinity Gate in time.

"When she was destroyed, it was as if all of my insides were torn out. I might as well have been destroyed along with her. For long years I wished I had. Designed to have a perfect memory, all I could do was remember. It was better to simply cease all remembrance. There was little left to do anyway. I was the last of a vanished race. So

I slept, hoping that I might slip into darkness. But it was not to be. My mind drifted into other realms and times. I saw and learned of things that would impress your Mistress Mnemos. Yet, I remained stricken by melancholy. I told you the Celestials were not made for a galaxy of unending hate and war. Neither were their offspring…"

"Sorry to interrupt again," I started.

"If that were so, you would not keep doing it," she remonstrated.

"It's just that, if your sister was destroyed thirty-five years ago, well…"

"How do I know of events that occurred in the years that followed? An astute observation, but even I have secrets I must keep."

As I started to ponder that, she interrupted, her tone lighter than before: "I'm glad you've come, for though you do not yet realize it, your arrival has been of great import and restored within me a renewed sense of purpose and hope! But now, you must depart."

"Wait," I stirred. "Why? What's happening?"

"*They are here!* And if they catch you, this will have all been in vain!"

Upon the screen was now an image of the Hall of Remembrance, its sentries standing in complete stillness. It was not the stillness of peace I sensed but coiled watchfulness. For this very purpose had they been formed.

A small army of fantastical aberrations oozed, crept, and crawled down the same narrow stairs from which we'd entered. "What are they?"

"They are spoken of only in hushed whispers," replied Archon-Ood. "What you see is but a tiny part of a vast horde of hideous, hungry, foul races, many of which no longer have names. Some were twisted from Skyriver's children… some were reanimated from those that mouldered in the catacombs… others are entities from umber realms, vile beyond imagining… all are slaves to the Dark Powers!"

"We have heard of those called the Rozzum," Cuenyne interjected.

"Then you know the danger you're in… but watch and wait!"

As the ghastly shapes became more distinguishable, I recognized a few from dusty old tales that spoke of things that stalked the worlds long ago. Others were creatures I never imagined could be, things that once seen could never be unseen…

When the last of their numbers entered, defiling the vast hall by their very presence, a path opened betwixt them, and three crowned corpse-things that were once men emerged through it. "Liches," the Watcher informed us. "Few can harm them!"

In a flicker of motion, the stone sentries sprang to life! The carnage that occurred in those next few moments was beyond anything that could tastefully be described here. The Stone Sentinels did their job well, smashing, shredding, and rending apart the hosts of miscreation. But even stone may shatter, as I learned when the malefic Liches cast their Circean spells. But in the end, it was the Sentinels who prevailed, and all that was left was a crimson lake of pulp and gore…

"They are but the first wave," Archon-Ood lamented. "Their masters will soon arrive, and when they do, even the sentries will not be able to long withstand them. Now, the time is at hand. I will send designated ones to destroy the Infinity Gate. The Osserians could not do so without destroying themselves, and so long as they were here, I would not."

"If you destroy the gate," I suddenly realized, "you'll be destroying yourself as well."

"Possibly, but that is *my* choice to make."

"You *cannot* do this, Mother!" Areana bewailed, pacing furiously. "The Enemy does not know of what we hide. Only these two threaten our security. Give them up, and they will leave us in peace."

"Be still, Areana," the Watcher scolded. "My personal safety is secondary to that of the galaxy, and we do not betray our guests and friends! Besides, they are more important than you know—which is why *you* will depart with them to ensure their escape."

"I do not wish to go with them," she responded, glaring at us before turning to her mistress with all the indignant fire she could muster. "I was created to protect *you* alone. It is with you I must remain!"

"You have served me well these many years. But it is they who now need your help. This is not a punishment, Areana. For too long have you been cooped up with me in this dungeon. This is a chance for you to have a life of your own; to explore and enjoy what the worlds have to offer. One day we will see each other again… on the other side if that is the Will of the Force."

"So you say," she said coldly. "If this is *your* will, I shall abide by it."

An awkward silence ensued, broken by a question I couldn't help but ask: "You believe in an afterlife?"

The strobing colors and rude sounds she produced caused me to regret having asked. "You assume that because we are made of inorganic materials our sapience is but sophisticated programming designed to mimic that of organics."

"No, I didn't say that," I backpedaled. "I *know* you have a real personality and mind. It's just that I'm not even sure that organic beings have *spirits*."

"In time, you will have more wisdom than you do now, but it is not I who will impart it. Now, you must go. I will transport you to the city above. Be wary! *They* are out there! Areana will follow to provide you the help you need to quickly escape this realm. Do not stray. Follow the map back. Illathurion is not otherwise charted, nor does it always operate like Realspace. It is a maze of strange domains and dangerous whorls, paths that lead to nothing or to unsettling loops, webs, and tunnels that stretch out to even stranger lands. As you have seen, it is not wholly evil, and on some worlds good yet reigns, but great evil haunts the stars, hidden, baleful forces that you would not believe if I told you. I bid you and your droid farewell!"

At that, the Watcher emitted a slow and melancholy tritone accompanied by azure and amethyst hues that were trailed by a discordant arrangement of notes to which Cuenyne beeped a lengthy interlude in return. While that musical exchange occurred, I glanced again upon the screen… and stopped cold. It was projecting an image from the surface… *where a gigantic and loathsome form was ambulating*. It meandered across the city. In a flash, its bulbous, tentacled head turned towards some sudden movement it had seen in the corner of its eyes.

Before I could even shout an alarm, having been rendered speechless, we were conveyed above ground, mercifully not far from our ship. Yet again I could hear Cuenyne warning me to just run and not look behind. This time I paid heed.

We rushed aboard and began prepping the ship for launch. Areana came at her own pace, skulking off to a corner. I hoped that she'd help us when the time came for it, or at least keep her head on.

As the *XS-Explorer* lifted off, I saw a tremendous shadow spread across the proximate buildings as if a gigantic hand raised to smack us back to the ground, crushing the ship within elongated talons or tearing it open like a meiloorun. The titanic being did not reappear, but as we neared orbit, a deep, resounding *BOOM* went off—and with it, a kilometers-wide circumference sank into the earth.

The Watcher, who had stood watch for tens of thousands of years, was no more… Archon-Ood and the underground city she'd help reshape was gone like the rest of the world's inhabitants.

With heavy hearts, we said goodbye to her and the stalwart Osserians who'd triumphed over so much, and to this strange and sorrowful world that once housed a great and numerous people who lost the war not to Imperials or Sith or invaders from beyond, but to their own apathy, selfishness, and greed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE HORROR FROM BEYOND

"Areana! I know you're upset about what happened, but I'd like it if we could be friends."

Silence.

This had gone on for some time since our departure. I had given her time to grieve in private. Condolences didn't arouse her, nor did a sense of duty or self-preservation. "I know this is a big change for you, but you might find we're not so bad if you gave us a chance… that is, if we make it out of here…"

Silence.

Areana will provide you the help you need, the Watcher had said, but she was clearly not interested. I clamped down on my impatience. "Archon-Ood only wanted what was best for you…"

"Do *NOT* speak her name!" she erupted without warning. "You *know* nothing! You *are* nothing! I protected her for millennia!" As she said this, her face took on a look of such rage that I felt physically assaulted.

Then she fell into silence once more. Despite my best efforts and those of Cuenyne's, she refused to respond again after that.

We finally arrived back in the vicinity of the graveyard, grateful to be close to getting out of this mad dimension and back home.

That was when *they* arrived!

It had begun as a mere spot in the grey canopy of space just south of our position. Then it started to grow, to spiral and fall inwards, turning inky as it spun in sulphurous swirls. Surely I was having another poorly-timed waking vision. Therewith, from out of the fuliginous vortex, the ruinous avatars of my darkest dreams stormed into view.

The first were three floating, cyclopean cubes of grasping, tentacled arms that stretched out from beneath their iridescent, gilded shields. I shuddered to think they matched the description of the parasitic anomaly encountered on Crseih Station years ago—*an entity known as Waru!* Could one of these approaching horrors be that very being?

They were followed by an array of tremendous, revolting annelids wearing horrible faces like the ceremonial death masques of the Hendanyn. The scientific part of my mind rebelled, insisting they were merely kin or predecessors to the giant exogorths that had been enhanced by the Adasca Corporation; but another voice said they were the rogue brood of the draconic Malmourral, the demon-god of the Frangawl Cult of Bardotta sent in forgotten times to destabilize the Tapani and the Culurin systems, now soaring the frozen black of space, sating their endless hunger.

Impossibly, they were each ridden by a humanoid shape, but against that grey and crimson sky they appeared as opaque adumbrations, living shadows with red eyes. From behind them emerged a swarm of Colossus Wasps, those inconceivable and unknown Hymenoptera that were said to have carried the Onderon system from the Stenness Node to the Japrael Sector during the War of Temporal Planes.

But they were merely the advance guard. From our starboard side burst a torrent of fantastical, evil-looking ships straight out of Londahl's perverse paintings. Some seemed alive and monstrous in size, with vertiginous, lancinating appendages and gaping maws!

Out of another vortex that opened to the north, something *else* emerged… It was indistinct, at first, a lacteal stain in space that expanded outward like veins to form a face. The "face" was like a twitching, pale-colored insectoid with deeply malevolent eyes that stared out at us. Spewing venomous, fibrous strands of stardust-taloned appendages, it seemed to reach forward with ever-extending legs…

"Cuenyne, fly as fast as this ship will allow and *faster*!"

"Aye aye, captain!"

"Areana, we're under attack and need your help *now*!" She refused to respond. "This is why you were sent here! Do your job, please!" No orders, pleas, or threats could make her as much as blink. She sat stock-still as a mannequin, head straight, gazing, I surmised, at some far-away memory.

That was why when her mouth started moving, I assumed she was finally coming around… only no words came out. Eventually, we could hear her whispering a phrase in some unknown tongue over and over again. The litany continued in a string of different phrases that she repeated in a loop.

"I don't suppose you want a translation," Cuenyne asked.

"It doesn't sound like anything good."

"It isn't!" Cuenyne wrenched the *Explorer* out of several thick strands of viscous webbing that were shooting from somewhere above!

The Watcher said the Enemy had been alerted to our arrival by spies, but what if it had been Areana? I suddenly felt the urge to toss this dangerously unstable android out the airlock. "What is she saying?"

"Don't say I didn't warn you. It's something about lesser beings and their unworthiness. Seems to be a paraphrase from the Sorcerers of Rhand: '*Their existence is fleeting. Our destruction is eternal… Only power is real, and the only real power is the power to destroy.*' The next one sounds like Old Sith… Something or somebody '*waits dreaming…*'"

"I change my mind. I don't want to know." Frantically I began to search for some kind of *off* switch before realizing that so advanced a design would never have an apparent shutoff. I tried several vocal commands to no avail. I considered the airlock again when, just as suddenly as it had started, she turned once more silent. "You're the one who summoned them, aren't you?" I asked. "I *will* toss you out the airlock if you do that again."

She didn't respond, of course, but she had at least stopped, though I thought I detected the hint of a smile. Had that expression always been there? A darker thought occurred to me: *What if the Watcher had sent her for another reason?* What if her advanced matrix had broken down over the millennia or I failed some enigmatic test she'd conjured up in her mad supercomputer mind? But that didn't make sense when she could easily have dispatched us earlier. Areana, however, was another matter.

The viewport revealed nightmares spattering out in space like blood from the stump of an exploding limb. Cuenyne was equipped with several grasping arms and appendages, all of which were out as he flew faster than a ship of this model would normally allow. That's when I heard the voices.

Whether I'd known their names from my research or whether they sprang from my unconscious thoughts, I couldn't say. Images came to me of those who'd traversed the gulfs in ages past, gliding above the lands of blind and wretched hordes that served as flesh orts for the incommensurable, feculent gods of dark Illathurion: Pnygatheem of the ossuary-world of dim Yumar; Mhu'anThul in his black house on Mezzallmech; the pestilential Lotek'k of the Charred Heath; Hērsum the Devout, known to the Mizx as Hershoon the Destroyer, that enormous mollusk who gorged his Ibliton offspring with blood from his teats in the carnal Citadel of Cykranosh.

But even they were lesser beings compared to *these*.

"Come to us," the first of the floating cubes sang buoyantly. "Hear the ancient tales of great Uthoqquan; here are fortuities few have ever tasted or seen, endless knowledge beyond the enterprise of Man for you alone to enjoy. Shed your fears and fictitious dreams of light and float with us in the endless oceans of Oozultharoum."

"Come to us," the second inveigled seductively. "You know me. We belong together. I will bestow unto you those deepest and most hidden desires which you have long sought. This and more, for all the riddles of the flesh are open before us and are yours for the taking. Come now, become as one with the wondrous Waru."

"Come to me," the third laughed liltingly, "for I am the incomparable Ooradryl, older than time and the jeweled stars of your fallen worlds. Free your mind from the false notion of morality… reach beyond such primitive concerns, and I will bequeath to you a thousand uncharted worlds to rule and lifetimes to explore. Am I not your destiny, he who has guided you these long years, the very reason for your being?"

These are the voices I heard and the visions I saw. It would have been a gift for my brain to have exploded right then and there. When the perdurable philters of their tenebrific minds, *poking*, *tasting*, *longing*, proved too much, before nausea overtook me, I managed to choke out a half-groan: "We need to do something fast. Do you have any ideas?"

"I do," said Cuenyne, "but it won't be pretty—although I see that we're well past that."

"I trust your judgement," I grimaced. "Just get us as far away from here as possible!"

Had Cuenyne and I not modified the *XS-Explorer* to boost the maximum atmospheric speed to 1,100 km/h, we'd have been immediately overtaken. As it was, it felt like we were only prolonging the inevitable.

Just as we seemed to have outdistanced them, other things came into view: vicious, bat-winged blasphemies with enormous sharp-toothed mouths that roared in retribution for their lost queen. These and other nameless, shapeless horrors appeared as if at every turn.

The Historical Society would want me to describe such things dispassionately, mechanically, so that they could more easily be dismissed as heretofore undiscovered races, exotic, to be sure, but nothing unnatural or—*heavens forbid!*—supernatural. But that would be a lie, for such things as these were no mere zoological anomalies or "unclassified alien lifeforms to be observed in their natural habitats." These were *monsters*, monsters with a will so malignant that had the Council encountered them directly, as surely as I had, they would know that I have not been hyperbolic.

If anything, I've held back.

The epiphytic armies suddenly ceased their pursuit… it took a moment before we understood why. Something *else* dwelt within this sphere beneath the maelstrom of orbiting wrecks. I could hear the ghastly altercation of alien minds claiming me for their own. I could feel their hunger, for they knew well the taste of Man.

Meanwhile, Areana resumed chanting her horrible chant, and the entities kept entreating in dolorous rhythm:

> *There is no escape from the galaxy of fear. Join our voices in eternal song to the Mighty Mother. Swim with us in the Oceans of Egestus. Feast on the sanguine juices of death and despair, and immortal you will be…*

I knew then that I would never flee the susurrations of the grisly diablerie. None ever did, and with a sickening, sinking feeling, I realized that my prior dolorous visions had all been true. This was the dominion from which nightmares arose.

"Hex," my alloy companion stated, taking me for a moment out of the pummeling trance, "she's standing!"

"Good. We have to get the coordinates from her," I said.

She stood before me, headless, wielding a long light-whip, which she now swung full-force at my neck. Though shocked by the sight, I managed to jump out of its path, but only barely, and received a painful red gash on my arm for my sluggish response. I spotted her head now sitting at the station behind her, starry eyes alit, directing her limbs, which now raised the tongue-whip to strike again.

"Hex… *the head*," Cuenyne sputtered, fiercely piloting. "It houses the intelligence matrix that remotely controls the body."

It was sound advice. Unfortunately, her formidable figure stood between me and my target, leaving me scant room to turn. I lethargically jumped out of the whip's trajectory and this time received a deep, painful cut to my right leg, my clothes not at all hindering the energy beam.

After that, things got worse!

An enormous, prehensile organ rose from below us. Cuenyne deftly steered around it, but a dozen more shot up, hurling decaying ships out of the way to grab at any

fast-moving target that veered too close. One of them latched onto the *Explorer,* causing it to heave with a disconcerting lurch. The astromech fired the Taim & Bak H9 single turbolaser at the organ, which caused it to lose its grip for a moment, and in that precious second Cuenyne corkscrewed around and away from it.

Areana's body swayed out of balance, and I launched, throwing all of my weight at her. But the thing had surprising strength and recovered quickly, elbowing me in the sacral plexus and punching the side of my head before hurling me back upon the spherical astrolabe. I just missed impaling myself on it, but a piece broke off, and I found myself stupidly concerned that the archaeological treasure would be irrevocably harmed. While I was doubled over she rose up to her full height, lifting the accursed light-whip above me.

But I was now in proximity of the android's commanding head.

"Don't destroy it," shouted Cuenyne. "She's got information we need stored in her memory banks."

That won't be a problem, I thought, cursing as she kicked my blaster away from me. Left with no choice, I grabbed the broken astrolabe's pointer rod and poked it into the head's left lucent eye, ripping it out just as quickly. The thing shrieked, causing the body to drop the light-whip, which I promptly kicked out of the way.

The android was not long in recuperating, however, and inexplicably began to turn its left wrist in a clockwise motion. "It's gone mad," I shouted before realizing what it was doing. The android used its right hand to fling its dismembered left hand away, revealing a fast-spinning, metallic cylinder ending at a sharp point.

As it leaped forward, I instinctually lifted up my arms to protect myself, and it thrust the whirling blade into my bicep. I turned in pain, but it stabbed again, piercing into my oblique. I struggled to flee, but I felt it cut again, puncturing deeply into my abdomen. I nearly blacked out.

Cuenyne kept calling, but I had no strength with which to answer. Lethargic and disoriented, I made a feeble attempt to move, all the time aware that I was going to die. The hideous head with its empty eye socket actually smiled. She swung down to pierce my face with the killing blow.

It never came.

A young man stood behind her, his two hands lit in flames, his eyes blazing—*one of which winked good-naturedly*! I resigned it to yet another hallucination even as it turned to the enraged Areana and set her on fire! Her disembodied screams would not easily be forgotten, but her body went to ash mercifully quickly.

I blacked out.

When I awoke, feeling cold at first, then hot and oddly pleasant in a drowsy way, I smelt the pure air and saw orange suns emerge behind lazy clouds drifting over a fertile valley, bestowing the blissful warmth of aureate eternality.

"Appears you were in a bit of trouble," a voice said. I awoke again, this time to the present, with the suns clarifying into flaming eyes. Once they dimmed to something approaching normal orbs, I could see my hallucinatory savior was a man in his late twenties with thick red hair and a trimmed beard. As if summoned from some empy-

real world where the gods were all beautiful and strong, he said, "We came to thank you for leading us here. We might never have found our aunt otherwise."

"Your *aunt*… I don't understand…" I mumbled, nearly passing out as he knelt beside me. He placed his hands—now doused but still lit with a fiery glow—on my forehead and wounds.

"You'll still need medical assistance and rest," he said after a few moments when he finished, "but your internal injuries are healed."

"Who are you?" was all I could think to utter.

"I am called Vuren. I was at one time known as 'Fire.' I think you can see why," he added with a roguish grin. "I must now depart to aid my brother and sisters. We will do what we can, but they are many, and we are only four."

"What's going on?" asked Cuenyne, sounding alarmed. "I detect fire."

But the contained fires from Areana's smoldering body had been doused as if by magic and there was nothing of her left, save the terrifying-looking head. Before I could offer thanks or ask any follow-up questions, he vanished. "As usual," I muttered, gingerly testing whether or not I could stand. Still tender, I cautiously returned to the cockpit.

"You're a bloody mess," Cuenyne exclaimed. "Who were you talking to? That didn't sound like our wayward android."

"I don't know who or what that was…" I replied, feeling disoriented. I dropped down in the gunner's seat. "I'm pretty sure he helped me, but… he reminded me of something I saw on Osseria… But I can't tell what's real anymore. I don't think I can even trust my own senses."

"Trust in yourself. Trust in the Force."

"That's an odd statement for an inorganic to make," I replied.

"Most inorganics don't have the depth of wisdom I have."

"Most organics don't either," I acknowledged. "What's happening out there?"

"It's gone quiet," the pointy-headed droid replied. "Too quiet."

"It looks like a band of stormclouds above and below us," I surmised. "It must be preventing them from seeing us."

"As in *atmospheric clouds*?" Cuenyne retorted. "I suppose they do look like that. A nebula maybe. Your clouds seem to be forming a tunnel around us."

"So I'm not crazy." The clouds created a snaking tube, the exterior of which reddened with an intense blaze of heat. At that same time, the interior appeared to solidify into a dimly lit channel.

"Not yet, but there's still time." Cuenyne sailed deeper into the tunnel. "It's closing behind us. No one's going to enter whatever that is. And lo and behold, it's escorting us back to the wormhole. Maybe you do have a friend out there."

As protective coverings went, it was an odd but welcome one. As if launched from a sling-shot, we sped through. It was bright enough to navigate but not enough to see the other side. Given the state I was in, I don't know if what came next was real or imagined, but what appeared to be faces made of earth, liquid, winds, and flames burst upon the interior walls, the latter of which seemed to wink!

The things that flew outside the tunnel were furiously trying to tear it apart, apparent by the gashes that kept opening. We must've been surrounded on all sides, but the tears re-solidified themselves before anything could get through.

By the time we reached the end of the channel, whatever was protecting us couldn't hold out any longer. Our pursuers began penetrating the shaft. Finally, the interior was eaten away entirely, the mist dispersed, and the exterior fire—having nothing with which to adhere—dissolved. We were left unprotected once more.

Beneath the jumble of destroyed ships moved a massive bulk. Most of it was concealed, but what *could* be seen would rend the sanity of lesser minds, for it can only be described as gargantuan. The monstrosity had no name that I knew of, but the term that came to mind was the Void-Horror, an ancient cancer that waited at the other side of the wormhole, tearing apart the vessels of hapless voyagers, peeling back crippled hulls to pluck out the terrified occupants within… but it was not flesh and bone that such diablerie fed upon.

The mere seconds upon which I gazed were enough to burn an impression of that chimerical madness forever into my brain, for amidst the nauseating mass of quivering, pallid flesh, *a hundred malevolent eyes puckered open and shut*.

We flew at risibly ferocious speeds, nearly splattering unto a dozen broken ships as we dove, spun, and whirled to get away, knowing that if we blew ourselves up in the process, it would be the far lesser of several evils.

"We're too late!" I think I screamed as dozens of grasping tentacles burst up from the Void-Horror. "*They're everywhere!*"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE WORMS EAT THROUGH SPACE AND TIME

Although I knew we were doomed, I refused to submit to the inevitability of it and began savagely shooting out lancing bolts of energy from the *Explorer's* front laser cannons, hitting tentacles, tumbling ships, and whatever else might dare to come near us.

There always seemed to be more, but a fierce and unwavering drive had taken hold of us. The thing below was growing frenzied too. Perhaps it had never felt the searing heat of a laser bolt. I fired with abandon, all sense of minutes or hours lost.

But for all our fury, it was to no avail. We were being herded.

Another cluster of tentacles lifted up to grab the corvette, forcing us to climb up out of the graveyard, only to loop over and descend right back into it again when we saw what awaited us outside.

A gruesome army had gathered above the graveyard. Upon spotting us, they began hurling roiling balls of flame that exploded all around, demolishing wrecks, even setting aflame some of the Void-Horror's feelers that resulted in a deafening screech and immediate retaliation.

The Void-Horror turned to these new targets. One of its appendages wrapped around one of the exogorths and pulled it and its screeching rider down. Another few snatched one of the wicked-looking ships, tearing it apart. I hadn't seen a mouth on the thing earlier, nor did I care to now, but its victims vanished into some tremendous opening that might have passed as a maw. In rapid response, a rain of fireballs was launched at it, followed by a legion of massive wasps with potent stingers that shot a glowing veridian acid. The Keeper had said that not all who dwelt in this expanse were friends.

But the voices from the floating cubes continued to drone, "There is no escape…"

"*There is no escape*," I repeated.

"Hex, what are you saying?"

"There is no escape… There isn't, but that doesn't mean we can't take a few of them with us! Target the largest of them."

"Blaze of glory it is," Cuenyne affirmed.

An enormous blast erupted from somewhere beyond the maelstrom, impacting on one of the foetid creatures or ships (it was no longer possible to tell). Another beam scattered the cube-like beings, followed by another, splitting open one of the exogorths, which spilled out a sickening purulence of entrails and shattered cartilage.

"What was that?!" I shouted.

"There's only one thing I can think of," replied Cuenyne.

"But the gate was destroyed!"

"Could be your new friend," Cuenyne reasoned, "or maybe the Watcher puts on a good show."

"Why wouldn't she just tell us?" A barrage of apparent asteroids came hurtling across our port bow, destroying and scattering our enemies.

"She may be protecting something… or *someones*," Cuenyne offered, taking advantage of the brief respite, "and doesn't want anyone to know. Historians have a tendency to make things known."

On the forward viewscreens, from the starboard side, rolled the strangest shape I'd ever seen. It bore an implausible number of eyes and wings upon a revolving wheel within a wheel, which it raised in flight just as the giant spiral of the wormhole came into view.

"Did I just imagine that?" I wondered.

"Are you still asking that?"

Streams of destructive energy continued lancing our enemies from beyond, thinning out the phantasmic armies. "The Watcher said the Firstborn had initially shared their discoveries with one another." Cuenyne knocked off a determined wasp that briefly alighted on top of the hull. "The force of the blast is not unlike what we know of the Guardian of Alashan. We could have other allies out here."

What a powerful force these Progenitors would be together! "Well, whoever it was bought us some time; best we not waste it. The Rebels fleeing the Charon used simple coordinates to escape Otherspace."

"Either by accident or they knew something we don't," Cuenyne replied. "The coordinates in this dimension aren't so easy to ascertain in relation to Realspace. With time, I could figure it out."

"The one thing we *don't* have!"

"Well, we can't fly back out the wormhole!"

Our window of escape closed. Whatever had kept our enemies at bay was no more. At that moment, the head of Areana spoke… or rather *croaked*, its speech capacitors all but fried. "The worms eat through space and time…"

"Oh dear, she's at it again!" Cuenyne groused, wizzing the *Explorer* through a sea of obscenities great and small.

To silence the hateful thing, I picked up the astrolabe's pointer rod and plunged it hard in the right eye. If I'm being frank, I probably stabbed it a few times. Smoke and fire emerged from the nostrils and mouth along with some kind of foul, viscous fluid. This was followed by a popping sound and a whirring noise. The head uttered a final, sibilant hiss before falling silent at last.

"The worms eat through space and time …" Cuenyne repeated.

"Wait… It couldn't be, could it? The worms *eat*, as in make holes…" I crowed. "*Wormholes!* It's a clue! But why would she help us now?"

"She *was* supposed to," Cuenyne said regretfully.

"And I just destroyed it!"

"I have a thought… The odds are slim beyond reckoning, but *it's* a possibility."

"Whatever it is, do it!" I said, jumping back in my seat just in time to dodge a new rain of conflagrant ships, talons, webs, and energy bolts, emboldened by the cessation of their mysterious adversaries. "We won't survive in here much longer!"

"Don't get your hopes up," the droid stated. "Steer for a bit."

"They rarely are. So what's your grand plan!?"

"Oh, I never said it was grand," he replied.

As I took over, an assortment of impossibly long and jointed legs wrapped itself around the port side of the *Explorer*, halting its movement mid-flight. Mercifully, at

that very moment, a burning missile flashed across the creature's femur and tibia, and with a nauseating chirrup it let go. I slipped the ship around, unfortunately right into the path of a giant exogorth which slammed headlong into our aft section.

"Our shields are gone!" I howled. The diminutive robot didn't respond, having begun communications with the ship while performing a series of technical manipulations that included attaching Areana's ruined head into a coiled cable that he'd ripped from the bulkhead. "How is that possible?" I asked while weaving the corvette in and out of a ferocity of hurtling fireballs, giant vespidae, and long-dead ships.

"You're thinking modern tech. Areana's older and far more advanced. Her components were designed to automatically adapt to whatever they're connected to."

I momentarily wondered at the value of introducing such technology to the galaxy before realizing that the first thing they would do with it was make weapons out of it. "Don't look now," I warned. The swirling mass of the wormhole appeared before us like the monstrous exhalation of a raging god annihilating all in its path.

"Head into the mouth of the tunnel," the droid urged.

"*I thought that's what you said we we* don't *want to do*?!"

"I don't," he said worriedly, keeping his photoreceptor on the task, "but I'm pretty sure there's a trick to it that will give us a window. It should work like the Endor Gate. You just need a key, and I think *she* has it. No guarantees, so don't go blaming me if we blow up, get sucked into the void, or wind up in the middle of a sun."

"I'll try not to. What now?"

"We just fly in. She'll course correct."

"Assuming she doesn't still hate us."

"I don't think she's still alive any longer, but that doesn't mean she can't still function like a nav computer. The Watcher sent her with us for a reason. Besides, I'd say death-by-calamitous-flight-through-wormhole is preferable to any of the other options currently facing us."

Those other *options* began to manifest.

As if they'd surmised our escape plan, into the chaos swam the cyclopean horrors led by the thing called Ooradryl. Everything in their path was invisibly hurled aside as they regally floated into the whirling debris before them. They were followed by the tenebrous army of flying worms, wraiths, insectoids, and bizarre ships.

"In case we don't make it," I started, faltering, "I'm sorry for dragging you into this. I just wish we'd gotten some hard evidence."

"I wouldn't have missed it for anything. And we do have evidence!"

"*Her*?" I asked, pointing to what was left of Areana's head.

"No. That has barely enough juice to do what it's hopefully doing." We were in the whirling maelstrom now, and the horrors were just behind us, catching up.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense!"

"What do you think all that beeping was when the Watcher said goodbye? She wasn't serenading us. She was transmitting the Osserians' records into my databanks!"

"Oh! That's good—wait, why didn't she just give you the coordinates that way?"

"Maybe she wanted to get rid of the android. Maybe she surmised her instability and hoped that with us she'd get better."

"Well, she got worse…"

Before I could say anything further, our senses were assaulted by a terrible screeching sound of metal being rent, which could only mean one thing: something had us in its grasp! And, at that very moment, we *soared*, hurtling the wrong way up a wormhole!

The trip back was, if possible, more harrowing than the trip there. At least it was for me since Cuenyne didn't see the colossal faces that leered out of the kaleidoscope with grim visages that wore expressions that had never known love or mercy; they did not stir but gazed upon us ghoulishly with the blackest of eyes. I could feel the cells in my bloodstream curdling, shutting down, dying.

And just like that, they were gone… But in my nightmares, before I wake in an icy sweat, I see them still.

We were back in Realspace, but the *XS-Explorer* was catastrophically damaged, and in moments we'd be sucked right back into the dimension from which we'd only barely escaped. Despite the protective crash webbing, I'd been thrown from the cockpit and was trapped underneath a fallen bulkhead. Thankfully, the hull hadn't yet ruptured, but that was a mere detail at this point.

"You have to go," I urged Cuenyne. "Take a lifeboat. Get to Attahox; from there you can find your way to Daalang or Fusai. The information you carry is all that matters. I'll follow if I can."

"Arhul," he said glumly. In all the years I'd known him he'd never called me that. "You know as well as I do that no one's going to accept the word of a droid. Not even one as brilliant as I am. Without you, the information is as good as worthless. I'm going to try and lift this debris…"

"They're going to have to! Listen, the pull of the wormhole is too strong, and in a few minutes we'll both be trapped back in Otherspace. Don't worry about me. I never expected to come back. I never needed to, except to bring this information. You asked me why I was doing this. The answer is… well, you know… Now, you have to go. You have to make them understand… so that it wasn't in vain…."

The droid was silent.

"Are you hearing me?"

"Yes, but… Wait. I understand now. I'll see you later, Hex."

"I'll see you later, Q9-X7."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A DROID'S TALE

The room burst into shouting, accusations, and exclamations as several of the members of the Historical Council and their guests realized for the first time who the previously rude droid actually was. Q9-X7 hovered forward, threatening to unleash another piercing shriek to silence them. Several covered their ears, but the room quieted down, all eyes upon him.

"Na'al!" Janzikek's voice resounded with accusation, his predatory, reptilian nature lending it a brooding undercurrent. "You've known me long enough to know I don't appreciate practical jokes!"

"I'm *not* playing one," Voren Na'al said defensively.

"Are you telling me that *this* Q9-X7 astromech droid that you earlier referred to as 'Master Mnemon' is actually *Hextrophon's droid, Cuenyne-Exseven?*"

"How many Q9s do you know?" Cuenyne asked.

"Apparently, one is too many!" he rasped in irritation.

"Master Mnemon, um, Q9, it appears you've been keeping secrets from all of us." Na'al had already guessed as much, but he said it in a chiding tone so as to prevent further recriminations.

"I have *not* been keeping secrets," Q9 responded patiently. "*Master Mnemon* is the title Mistress Mnemos gave me. If any of you had bothered to look into my background—which you wouldn't because you still think of droids as little more than ambulatory gadgets that exist solely to make your lives easier…" several companion droids in the room chimed in with loud beeps, warbles, and articulations of assent, "then you'd have known that I was Hextrophon's companion."

"This isn't the time for a sermon on droids' rights," Graf-Well roared.

"Perhaps you can tell us exactly what happened," Na'al interjected.

"Actually, I can answer that," Mungo Baobab announced, standing up. "Mistress Mnemos had contacted Auren and I to tell us what Arhul was planning. It seemed rash and a bit exciting, but when we heard he'd gone to the blasted Hellhoop, we came after him, fearing the worst. We arrived a few days after they'd left and in time to see his ship emerge out of a wormhole."

"That would be the time dilation factor," Q9 replied. "We were gone for weeks."

Reina Solov chimed in. "Look, I may not accept much of this, but from a quantum physics perspective, it supports Hextrophon's account. This happens in Hyperspace all the time, which is why ships are equipped with relativistic shields to compensate. Pocket dimensions such as Otherspace would see time flowing at a different rate from the perspective of Realspace."

"There was nothing about that in the report from the crew of the *Celestial*?" asked Janzikek, still vexed by what he felt was a ploy on the opposing team's part.

"Well, we were all a little busy fighting the Empire, if you recall. Besides, if they were lying—as some of you seem to be implying," grunted Baobab, "they'd have stayed away considerably longer to account for their time in Otherspace!"

"As far as those odd-looking ships he reported, I can comment on that," offered Corellia Antilles. "One of those huge, archaic vessels lies derelict in the Valtava sector, contorting the Hyperspace lanes in the sector for lightyears around. After investigating an asteroid belt of crimson crystals spilling from its fractured hull, the Gree, who are not prone to exaggeration, reported that the ship emanated evil power and warned that any who boarded risked opening themselves to the *black mind of the one that waits dreaming*. If that sounds familiar, it's because it's basically one of the unsettling things Areana was translated as having said."

"It wasn't the only unsettling thing," Baobab added, "and I've seen a lot over the years. Some kind of… tendril was holding onto their ship when it emerged. I can't describe it, but it was horrible. There was a blinding flash, and it was gone. I made contact with Q9 and tractored the ship in, bringing Hextrophon back to Chandrila."

"Where he recovered under my care," interjected Dr. Tonique, who had arrived earlier during Seldona's reading. Her hair was up in a halo braid with a low bun, and a simple but elegant mauve tunic offset her chestnut skin. "As he himself indicated, I did not agree with Arhul's unconscionably reckless excursion into Otherspace, but that was his choice to make. With the history he obtained from the Watcher, Q9 and I began helping him collate the voluminous amount of data into a relatively cohesive narrative of the ancient galaxy."

"Of course *you* believe him, he's your friend!" accused Hanapen.

"Friendship has *nothing* to do with it," she shot back sternly. "We are professionals, though your own combative nature of late has caused me to question that."

Hanapen seethed, but before he could go on the offensive, Tem Eliss cut in. "She's right, Abric. You've been uncharacteristically hostile these last two days."

"I call it being a good scientist!" he shot back.

"Well, I call it needing a doctor," Eliss returned, and to that Abric remained silent.

"Misqa, perhaps you can help us understand why Arhul chose to compose the manuscript the way he did?" Eliss asked.

"It was his decision not to write it in the usual manner but as a hybrid of narrative and annalistic styles. I don't pretend to understand it myself, but he'd made it clear that it wasn't intended for this body but for the public…"

"Then the public can publish it," someone shouted from the crowd.

Misqa ignored it. "In regard to the details that some of you have taken umbrage with, some of it was derived from… I'm not sure how to properly describe them… *visions*, he said they were. These were different from the nightmares that were troubling him… Before you scoff, the visions were very specific in nature, and in ways that are hard to make sense of rationally. Arhul challenged me to test the information he received from

them against recently uncovered history that *could* validate their worth or disprove them altogether. At the time, historians had only begun studying the holocron of Dathka Graush. So I went to the Coruscant Museum where the holocron was undergoing study, and Q9 went to Fusai to apprise Mistress Mnemos of their discoveries. I hadn't wanted to leave, but he insisted that we had to be kept safe. He was killed a few days later.

"He surmised that, following his experience in Otherspace, some kind of tenuous connection had been established between him and the *entities* of that sidereal realm who oppressed him. That's what the nightmares were about."

"Q9, were you also aware of these premonitions?" Eliss asked. "I'm trying to ascertain why the manuscript contains elements that not only pre-date the Osserians but include private conversations and thoughts of beings that no one could know! Unless his original hypothesis was correct—that the Watcher's tale included myths and legends—it appears to us that Arhul added fictional elements to the account, which I consider an unwise choice, even if it does make it more digestible to the public."

"You're under the impression that the discoveries we made were simply taken in stride," the droid admonished. "Hex's entire worldview was shattered, and he struggled with the implications of that. His nightmares and visions made him depressed and angry, but not insane. He had no interest in adding fiction to his account. The main reason he sent me and Dr. Tonique away was to protect us and ensure that the information got out. That's why no one could know in advance that we were involved, but verifying those visions was another part of it."

"And did you?" Eliss' eyes flashed with a keen glint.

"Yes!" Professor Tonique declared. Gasps of astonishment burst from the crowd. "No one knew the contents of Graush's holocron save for myself and those researchers studying it. *Graush had apprenticed under Darth Dreadwar*. Arhul could not have known that or the details of that apprenticeship that Graush's holocron revealed."

"And the material I received from the Watcher does not include those elements either," Q9 added, "though it does verify the greater part of the events that transpired before and during the course of the Cosmic Wars. Because we had that verification, he felt safe adding details from his visions, as they provided necessary context."

"That is *most* curious," Eliss said. "I will have to take this into serious consideration."

"It doesn't matter," Janzikek added. "Sith history is *one* thing, but we can't be expected to accept at face value conversations between Celestials and the thoughts of gods and demons."

"It stands to reason that if the one is true, so is the other," Hoole indicated.

"I don't see what all the fuss is about," interrupted Myk Bidlor. "I'm a forensic expert. That means I look at hard evidence with scientific principles in mind. And, frankly, I haven't heard anything that would disqualify Hextrophon's story from being true."

"You were a crime scene investigator for the *Hutts*," charged Jedi Archivist Mander Zuma, the second of Tionne Solusar's apprentices to have joined the conference. Unlike Veste Gesdol, he wasn't buying any of it. The Force was as natural to him as sunlight and rain. It didn't need to be tainted with mysticism or religion, which were just differ-

ent types of mind-tricks as far as he was concerned. Zuma didn't personally dislike Bidlor, but he knew of the influence he wielded in some sectors and wasn't about to let him skate by on his charisma and still-boyish good looks.

"*You* worked for the Hutts, too!" Bidlor countered.

"I worked *with* the Hutts," Zuma corrected, "and that was strictly to find the source of a dangerous substance and its producer."

"*Same* difference," Bidlor scorned. "The point is: I live by facts. That doesn't mean I'm so blind as to doubt there's some weird and unexplainable flarg out there!"

"They're only *weird* and *unexplainable* until we can investigate and explain them."

"You know, Zuma, restating conventional wisdom over and over doesn't make it so," Bidlor argued. "I mean, look how many of you doubted the Nevoota Bee was real until *I* discovered a colony in the Markaran Plains of Balmorra!"

"Not this again!" exclaimed Donn Gulek.

"Yes, this again!" Bidlor demanded. "Most of you thought it was a Mandalorian myth. And even when I furnished proof, some of you tried to handwave it away, insisting they were 'mutated quigs.' So do you remember what I did? I wrote an adventure story about them! While the lot of you were mucking about with semantics, the galaxy came to know that the Nevoota Bee was an actual creature and genuine threat!"

"Bidlor's right," blurted Charon Thanas just as several were getting ready to object. "Apologies, Professor Eliss, but this is crucial." When the Iyra nodded, he continued. "You have to add *some* embellishment; otherwise, you lose the average citizen. I'm a self-taught historian who's researched places as far ranging as Kathol and Cularin. I've seen things that most wouldn't believe. To get people to look into what is outside the everyday norms, a certain amount of dramatic license must be allowed…"

"So now we have a TIE fighter pilot telling us how to conduct our affairs!" Gulek griped angrily. Other members nodded and raised their voices in agreement. If they couldn't discredit Bidlor, they could certainly discredit Thanas. Had he not twice aided the New Republic, he'd have not even been allowed inside the building, let alone the meeting, regardless of his friendship with Na'al and Organa Solo.

Knowing what they were up to, Bidlor spoke up in his defense: "Thanas only joined the Empire because he was told his parents were killed on the Death Star."

"And then he became an Imperial spy!" Hanapen interjected. "I'm not sure why either of these men have been given a platform today!"

"That is all ancient history!" Tipn cried. "Thanas spent his remaining fortune liberating the Dralion System from the Vong while waiting for the New Republic to come and help… which they never did!"

"Our citizens come before Imperials," Hanapen insisted.

"I wasn't Imperial at that time," Thanas stated calmly.

"Were you not rewarded with an invitation to their Inner Circle?"

Thanas had to wait for the crowd to die down. "Until the Emperor perished. By accident I came upon Princess Leia, who let me know that my parents died on Alderaan, not on the Death Star, and convinced me to stand trial. I remain in your debt, Princess!"

Leia nodded before adding, "I vouched for him *then* as I do *now*. Fortunately, most of Thanas' missions as a TIE fighter pilot were against pirates and Imperial traitors, and it should be noted that his choices were as much a casualty of the war as Alderaan was."

"I see we're being selective with history today!" Hanapen carped. "Or are we to conveniently forget your service to Thrawn."

The audience was enthralled by this new debate. Thanas just sighed. "I built a casino and spaceport called Gambler's Rock. Around this time, I met Bidlor and Na'al, who inspired me to become a historian. When Thrawn came to power, I had no interest in politics, but the destruction of Gambler's Rock *by the New Republic* made my decision for me. So I served alongside Maarek Stele. When Palpatine's clones proved insane, I came to my senses and sabotaged the missile before it struck the New Republic's headquarters on Nespis VIII. Later, with Na'al's and Jedi Master Tionne's help, I became a historian."

"*I* know of you, even if these others don't," Professor Eliss declared. "Your work in the Cularin system has been invaluable, as has your research on the ancient Jedi and Sith. I see no reason why you shouldn't be formally invited to this society, and rest assured that I will bring the matter to discussion. But back to the immediate subject at hand: have either of you courageous men perused the rest of Arhul's manuscript?"

"Well, I've skimmed it…" Bidlor admitted. "What? It's *bloody* long!"

"I've read portions," Thanas acknowledged.

"Which means that you two are very likely unaware that Hextrophon claims to have composed some of his material *after* his death. Unless this epilogue is more poetic invention, this body is unsure how to account for that."

"I received his final transmission two days *after* his body was discovered. I have no doubt it was him, a fact I substantiated by means of knowledge only he would have. I cannot explain it—none of you can—but it is my belief that he reached out to me from a place the Jedi colloquially refer to as *Beyond Shadows…*"

"Utter bosh!" exclaimed Zuma. Everything else was drowned out by surprise, anger, and nervous laughter, with not a few annoyed at the incorporation of "Jedi mysticism" in what they saw as a cheap attempt to bolster an improbable narrative. Demands were even made to have Q9's testimony entered as evidence of malfunction or bias.

Q9 responded in kind, calling his opponents a "gaggle of feleks," reserving a few other inappropriate terms for Hanapen.

In the midst of the erupting chaos, a wild-eyed Hanapen stood up to castigate Q9: "How *dare* you presume to criticize us, *we who are your makers and natural superiors?* Based on this imaginative fiction, not to mention *your* deceptive manipulations, I make a motion that this *fantasy* be immediately filed in the Spurious Directories, where a special committee can determine what little legitimacy there might be in his mumbo-jumbo."

"Ironic that you of all people would question legitimacy," Cuenyne intoned, drawing closer to where the apoplectic Velmoc stood. "You and your companions have been trying to shut us down for quite some time, haven't you? You know, you're not the only one who's been watching the Council." Q9 then floated uncomfortably close to the Velmoc's face.

"You don't scare me, *machine*," Hanapen whispered darkly to him. "I've seen better than you shredded to pieces in agonizing screams of despair."

"I *know* you have," the droid responded. "Now, it's your turn!" The astromech suddenly whipped out several metal appendages; two of the ones that ended in large claws plunged deep into Hanapen's upper chest so that he couldn't pull away; another was a whirring buzzblade that Q9 used to slice deep into Hanapen's neck.

The Velmoc wailed and tried desperately to push the droid off but was unable to dislodge himself while the blade shredded deeper, causing Hanapen's tendons to be severed in wild ejaculations of foul green fluid that sprayed all over his associates until the head was finally seared off and bounced to the floor.

It all happened so quickly that everyone just sat in utter shock and horror. After a moment, the audience rose up in a rush of outcry and commotion! But Q9 echoed in a loud, commanding voice, even as he continued to hold on to Hanapen's headless corpse: "Remain where you are! All is not as it seems!"

Amidst the terror and confusion, Na'al shouted, "Silence, please! That's not Velmoc blood!" Neither Hanapen's severed head nor the opening in his body showed a drop of the red ichor or pulpy gore that Hanapen should've spilled, only the green, fetid exudation… and then something even stranger happened.

An ebon thing, ink-like, approximating that of a tall humanoid, emerged out of the body from the neck and floated upwards like smoke from a cigarra. No features at all could be discerned upon its face or body, for the thing was etched in deepest shadow; but its eyes glowed ochre with hatred. The ebon simulacra emitted a short, subsonic noise, and, in that briefest of seconds, if one looked to where the creature's face lifted, one would have seen not the Grand Hall's ornate ceiling, nor its elaborate, five-hundred-year-old Scillalian chandelier, but a vermillion and charcoal sky with pinprick black spots and eerily floating, moribund spheres. But the vision passed quickly, and the necromantic thing seemed to laugh. Then, like the accursed and sable demon it was, the Shadow Being shot up through the portal into the beyond, where it was not seen again.

Only then did Q9 drop the body. "Well, that takes care of that!"

The room broke out in released disquiet and a great clamor that lasted a long while. Na'al used the time to have the building personnel remove Hanapen's remains.

Q9 eventually floated back to his spot, though several in the crowd recoiled as he passed them by.

Janzikek's voice trembled as he was heard to say, "It must have been some kind of mutant Defel?"

"A Filar-Nitzan most likely!" added Thanas.

"No, both are quite different," Hoole responded. "Nor was it any of the known shapeshifters. Even I cannot pass through solid walls."

"I've never seen anything like that," gasped Wolam Tser.

"Some kind of Dark Side illusion?" Garv Debble postulated.

"Possibly," responded Anki Pace. "But that *thing* seemed different."

"I know what I saw!" Baobab protested, paling at the recollection.

"It was Hex's killer," said Q9, "a Shadow Being. I initially thought it must have entered Realspace when we came through the wormhole, hitching a ride on the *Explorer* when its pet latched onto us. But there could be another explanation."

"Q9, if this is another of your elaborate hoaxes…" Janzikek warned, but even he seemed shaken. The whole room continued to buzz and stir, anxious for any explanation that would make sense of the horror they'd just seen.

"I assure you, it's not," Q9 replied with a touch of annoyance.

"Well, I hope you have some explanation… *besides the supernatural!*" Gulek charged.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Donn," Q9 returned, "but that's the only explanation I have. I made a point of learning who each and every one of Hex's opponents might be; anyone who would have cause to see his work buried. Hanapen, as it turned out, was a high-ranking member of the Liberty Builders."

"Conspiracy nonsense," Janzikek spat. "Dozens of Council members have an affiliation with the Liberty Builders. They're a charitable organization, not worshipers of Bogan or acolytes of Typhojem or whatever delusion you and Hextrophon conjured up."

"Only their high-degree adepts are let in on their secrets. But if you *read* their forbidden texts as I have," Cuenyne continued undaunted, "you'll see they make no bones about their sacred symbols, philosophical beliefs, and origins which come directly from the Azurite Society of Lords, the Heinsnake Cult, and the Krath—all of whom espouse ideas that are, for all intents and purposes, identical to that of the Sith and other dangerous groups, including beliefs in *Näkhäsh*, the Shadow Father, and invocations to the *Yû Mâgzûr*, translated as 'Ancient Masters,' and the *Kû Gothur*, or the 'Old Ones.' I found these very supplications in a secret room in the sub-basement of Hanapen's home, a room covered in strange symbols. It was clear what he'd been doing."

"And what is it you *think* he'd been doing?" Janzikek demanded. "Practicing one's religious beliefs, no matter how strange or offputting they might seem, does not mean you can condemn him to death!" Janzikek practically shouted.

"I can show you the recordings," Q9 offered.

"Perhaps not right now," Na'al interjected. "I think we've all been traumatized enough for one day."

"Fine," Q9 continued. "You may not want to believe it, Janzikek, but I suspect Abric Hanapen used an ancient summoning spell to conjure a Shadow Being of some kind. He probably believed it would serve him as a familiar, maybe to bring him greater wealth or prestige. But he made a mistake: the thing he summoned does not serve any but its master. It tried to take him over, but he resisted. So it killed him and exsanguinated his body, after which it embalmed the corpse with its own ectoplasmic fluids to prevent any hint of decomposition; finally, it went about impersonating him."

"There is precedent for similar phenomena," Jedi Master Tionne offered. "We cannot discount the childhood of Sith Emperor Vitiate or the uncovered journals of Hethrir, who belonged to the Order of the Canted Circle and who is responsible for bringing Waru from Otherspace—an order given by Palpatine himself after he learned of forces stirring in the Unknown Regions."

"The former Procurator of Justice was probably as deranged as Hextrophon," quipped Professor Roi Tenne. "And Vitiate's past is speculation."

"You *would* say that," Q9 said sharply, "being a member of that same secret society. Mistress Mnemos decrypted your files. I think the heads of the Council will be *quite* interested in reading what amounts to a conspiracy to ensure that Hextrophon's datafiles were destroyed or sent to the SDs. Those documents are now in your datapads."

It didn't take long for them to read the decrypted files. They were damning enough to have Tenne and Hanapen's immediate associates publicly censured and removed from the chamber, with additional consequences pending further examination and trial.

"Well, I can assure you that *I* am part of no conspiracy," insisted Janzikek, "and none of this justifies you slicing off Hanapen's head! As you said, that thing probably followed you from Otherspace?"

"So, you *do* believe we went to Otherspace?"

The Tisshar grinned mischievously. "That does not mean I believe the rest."

"There's more," the droid said unfazed. "I also kept tabs on your families."

Janzikek uttered an exasperated sound. "Of course, you did!"

"The thing that impersonated Hanapen might've fooled his colleagues—but not his wife. Some weeks ago, she left him to stay with their eldest daughter. I took the liberty of interviewing Mrs. Hanapen. She admitted that she was afraid of him. He had become a virtual stranger to her, claiming she no longer knew the Velmoc she'd married."

"What if you'd been wrong?" Janzikek swore. "All you've given us are unorthodox hobbies, some indiscretion on the part of the Obroan Institute, and the misgivings of his wife! Some of my own wives have said similar things about me! Would you slice off my head as well?"

"Much as that would bring me pleasure," Q9 said drolly, "I did have a little more to go on than that. I make it a point to keep myself regularly upgraded with all the newest advances and modifications. For example, I'm outfitted with a sophisticated detection package that includes a residual heat-trend directionalizer and a molecular backtrack sniffer. For the technologically-challenged amongst you, these are scanning devices that can discern and follow the heat and chemical trails of a wide variety of organic beings. Hanapen's registered wrong. As I drew closer to him, I could detect that his body was not only emitting no heat-signature, but his chemical essence was not what it should have been. In short, Hanapen could not have been a Velmoc—not a living one, anyway—and this confirmed that he was an energumen that must be destroyed."

"You could have led with that!" Janzikek's complaint aside, the Tiss'shar was clearly perturbed by the revelation and its aftermath.

"I think, perhaps, a *thank you* is in order," Na'al stated. "This has all been… *disturbing*, to say the least. I know the Council does not want to drag this on for another day if we don't have to, so I suggest we deal with all of this after we retire for a break, a meal, and perhaps a drink to collect our wits. Whoever wants to stay with us into the evening is welcome to." He was glad to see that most did. After thanking Hari Seldona, he concluded, "Anyone who still has the nerve should gather back here in an hour to continue the reading and hear the conclusions that Hextrophon went to such lengths to reveal. Master Mne… I mean, Q9, are you up to completing the remaining part of your former master's journal?"

"You'll hear it in his own words," Cuenyne replied.

BOOK III
FIRSTBORN OF THE CELESTIALS AND THE ARCHITECTS OF MADNESS

"No longer a mere Human in a Human world, I moved through strange lands of gods and demons, clinging desperately to the memories of a life where people fought, laughed, and loved." ~*The Legend of Bas,* by Ciaran the Bard

"Why in the worlds do we feed all our leaders
With treasure they steal from the poor?
And why in the worlds do we seal them as keepers
With measures of power that we all abhor?"
~*The Writings of Ghoel the Wol Cabasshite*

CHAPTER TWENTY

SONGS OF THE ETERNAL

A vision granted me by one who roamed the stars in the still-barren galaxy in the dreamlike empyrean days before the later universes came to be and the waning ages of death and deathly frost fell upon them:

A rush of fiery wind and light stirred in the phantasmal mists of the endless void, a Great Light that uttered a note, a primordial song, singular, prodigious, and beautiful beyond all things, and never heard again. Stars winked on across the Primary Dimension like the glowing lanterns of Venexian ships along the mighty Solleu River at the behest of dusk, a dazzling panoply of lights for the fathomless gulfs that were as yet fruitless and still. These were the cyclic and star polygons, the annulus and the arbelos, the triquetra and lemniscates, all of varying geometry and degree, swimming through empyreal space like cnidaria floating in the deep sea; the shining ones, luminous and wise, encompassed of those four living creatures unknown to most, the Kerubîm, Ophannīm, Serafîm, and Mal'akim Celestials. And in that chatoyant light, they danced to the music of the glittering firmament in abandon.

The circuit of life began with ebullient energy spilling forth into the expectant vastness, a power like none other to move and shape and grow. And from the source of light and life blossomed the Force, sown and harvested by the will of the Father of Lights, who is its supreme and supernal master and the one who first uttered the song. And the Force permeated all life and echoed back, and time began its desultory flow.

Discordant notes entered at this time, produced by those who coveted the Dawn World, for the fear of lost glory had come to poison their hearts; and as thoughts of domination arose, so too a deep Shadow began to occlude the face of the deep, borne of those luminous stars who opposed the composition blossoming before and around them and especially on the Plane of Erets.

Nevertheless, a second and third sound rang forth even more sublime than the first, intermingling with it, causing the garden world beneath the jeweled dome to emerge in the midst of the darkened seas, awakening with its resonance all manner of astonishing life, a song sweeter even than before but also never heard again.

The Luminous Ones were yet incomplete, for the Maker had an endowment to bestow upon them of inestimable worth. So it came about that while gathered there before the warming light of the Eternal, the Celestials were given the gift and came to fully comprehend Love, Justice, Power, and Wisdom, and were thereby tasked to learn of the universe they would help germinate and configure. Free to roam and frolic, many amongst the Celestials descended to the Plane of Erets, and there they formed themselves into harmonic shapes—Feline, Avian, Bovine, and Human—that dwelt then in peace.

Erets was wondrous and alluring beyond compare, with every element upon it an intoxicant so varied and unique that few could not help but fall in love with the

Dawn World, for they were to be as panoptic companions and guides to its sentient and sapient inhabitants and their interweaving components. And so it was that Erets surpassed even the infinite wonder they had previously known.

There is much that occurred in the early days of the tiny movers who dwelt upon the Dawn World in the Primary Dimension that does not come into this account, save that with the coming of the younger race, the final song was nearing its conclusion. And from the discordant notes and the terrible shade that it cast would come the long war that is now known in all lands across the shimmering universe, that most ancient of wars between the Darkness and the Light, between the predator-beasts of Bogan and the protector-beasts of Ashla, the war that first crashed like foaming seas on barren plains to engulf the tiny movers of Erets… amongst whom it still rages, though not for all time.

The Celestials did all they could to provide succor for the innocent, all the while grieving the ruination that had been wrought, for their original purpose had been thwarted, and though restoration was prepared, it was known to be far into the future. A host of the powerful would continue to fight and stake claim as stewards to various peoples and places, but there were those who could not long withstand the wicked cruelty, violence, and betrayal that spilled in waves of darkness across the cosmic and tellurian battlefields.

For these latter ones, leave was given to prepare Seed Pods that would make up new dimensions, Cosmic Eggs from which they might birth anew the phenomenal phantasies of their minds, and they considered the terrestrial, tropospheric, subterranean, and aquatic shapes they might devise. But they were not yet to cast any shape nor harvest the four Seed Pods until the Great Song was ended. Furthermore, they were warned aforetime that the Shadow would find its way into all realms and times.

Departing the war-torn Dawn World, now thrust into the cycle of chilling winter's death and spring's tenacious rebirth, the Celestials went forth to devise realms of their imagination. For the four Celestials of the Osiarch who would bring forth the Cosmos, it was a long period of fertile progeneration, for although different in form and function from the Dawn World, they wished Skyriver to have a similarity of strength. Others were not as cautious or meticulous in their crafting, seeking a quick escape in which only a casual edifice with chimerical adornments would do, but these would be subject to an equally rapid relinquishment, dissolution, or destruction when the Enemy came or when ennui and indifference took hold.

The Cosmic Eggs of the Osiarch had been secured inside a Foundation Stone placed at the center of their vast expanse known then only as the Cosmos. Now with the final notes of the Great Song, the Foundation Stone triggered the incubation and hatching of the Seed Pods as they burst open with hundreds of thousands of smaller seeds containing the elements that dispersed and formed into a new type of realm—one of many earths and satellites and suns.

Out of the sun-seeds came the Starbirds, called also Firebirds and Sun Dragons, what had been known as the Phoenix on Erets; they were the beloved wild beings of the Supreme Master who were called forth to light up the void. A myriad of myriads in dazzling patterns swarmed out of the proto-galactic epicenter to bring boundless

incandescence, warmth, and growth for the innumerable germinating suns that came to swirl around them. Out of the earth-seeds came their dancing counterparts, the Firedrakes, to inhabit the cores of the many-hued, polychromatic planets and some of their otherworldly satellites—inner-light bonding with the cynosure of outer-light, generating and incubating the seeds that brought forth and cherished life.[8]

As the parents of the Elementals took their place, so came their children, the Fire Elementals, or Pyrdrakons; the Water Elementals, or Hydresians; the Earth Elementals, or Ersetians; and the Air Elementals, or Ruakians; all embodying what wondrous forms they would, occupied in perfect harmony with one another and the Whills. Rarely encountered even in the Earliest Days, Elementals were regarded as the spirits of the Planets and Stars.

Their work complete, the original Seed Pods hardened into golden, planet-sized crystals that now orbit within the Colonies and are today known as the Aur Diamonds, while the Foundation Stone itself was split into two parts. The larger grew into a Sacred World that remained at the heart of the galaxy as a wellspring of life, and there it would be hidden and safeguarded; the smaller shrunk and was kept secret on a nondescript red planet.

The four Osiarch then placed in key positions the four Quantum Machines, biocosmic devices of great power that served as an inaugural tessellation to hold together the fabric of reality for the Cosmos, one of several steps that Celestials of other large realms failed to do. *Sunnesine*, or the Sunshine Machine, was secured on Tropicant; it first fueled the suns, which symbiotically fed the Sun Dragons, who in turn nourish the suns; *Orbitae*, or the Orbit Machine, in the Spinstones, begot and helped maintain the alignment and stable orbits of the stars, planets, and moons; *Quantum Satis*, or the Quantum Pump, on Magmar, filled the galaxy with aether and particulate matter, luminiferous ether being the medium for the propagation of light as well as electromagnetic and gravitational forces; the *Fāta Māchina*, or the Fate Machine, on Samarra in the Deep Core, opened the passage for the numinous flow of microscopic organelles, those misunderstood communicants known as Midichlorians, enabling life to flourish in harmonious affinity with their symbionts, the Whills, with whom they danced in rapture the complex movement of love, spreading out from the epicenter as living flames of the Imperishable Fire to continually find purchase in all that had life! And so, all life would always have a connection to its Lifegiver and each other, and into every living form they found purchase, drawn to those with greater gifts in greater need of their voices.

Though the Fate Machine was later sabotaged by its guardians, allowing access to the Anti-Force by its agents, by then the Cosmos was long established, and so it was relocated to Isorropía.[9]

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[8] Firedrakes or Fireworms or Lava Dragons are often found after they'd gone mad or been disturbed.

[9] Though oft-mocked by modern scientists as being based on a flawed understanding of celestial movements, the Shawken Device was constructed to reverse the workings of the Orbitae, inverting its energy to cause systems to repel rather than adhere.

The four Osiarch and three of the Valdilar also prepared the seven dwarf galaxies as companions to the mighty Cosmos. Their names are forgotten and are known now only by their modern designations, but in ancient times they were called:

Jinnorseel, or "Doorways;" it is known as the Rishi Maze and Companion Aurek.
Pûrgrothiá, translated as "Firefist;" this was later designated Companion Besh.
Yammsara, the "Sea of Sustenance." Later it became *Yammsoro,* the "Sea of Atonement;" it is now identified as Companion Cresh.
Aelios, translated as "Dawnrider;" it is at present regarded as Companion Dorn.
Massula, translated as "Guardian," is currently known as Companion Esk.
Amhranair, translated as the "Single Song," is now termed Companion Forn.
Mystērii, translated as the "Unknown," is presently called Companion Grek.[10]

With the Companions completed, the Osiarch had a vast universe of their own.

Lluxos was Chief amongst the Osiarch of that realm. He was called in their tongue "Earth-worker," for the organisms he shaped were an encomium to the fauna and flora they'd adored in the Plane of Erets so long ago, and there was no end to the derivations they could fashion from them. Besides Lluxos, there were Marutz, Xurz, and Wutzek. These appeared as glowing conglomerations of pastel sapphirine and silvery globes, winged, and with the faces of birds, beasts, and men.

Together, they christened their realm *Samûnaru*, or "Skyriver," as it is now known, and were joined by other Celestials called the Valdilar to aid in bringing forth the lifeforms that would populate it.

Circean in intrigue, diverting, and wondrous were the forms they created: the marvelous protista, the peculiar monera, the alluring and myriad flora, the remarkable spongia and minerale; but it was perhaps the multitude of fauna that offered the greatest and most fervent of Sybaritic joys. So intrigued were the Celestials by these that they would later shape sapients just like them, bringing forth new races that resembled those lifeforms large and small that now populated the lands and the seas above and below with numerous and variant concordances based upon the neoteric protoplast of the races of Erets. Once complete, the remaining Valdilar settled the Sacred Worlds. Soon they would manifest as guides and caretakers in forms both luminous and incarnate.

The time had come to prepare the Firstborn, who would serve as champions and guides for their own offspring, the lifeforms they would bring into being. Many were the enigmatic and Force-endowed gifts bestowed upon the First Ones of the Celestials; they ranged from the power to create marvels of archaean form, to shaping matter with hands and minds, to aggregating elements for the building of worlds, and all were designed in love as beings of grace, for they were to one day take the place of the Celestials, who it was said would not always remain, for they would one day be recalled to the Dawn World and its ancient stars, destined for tasks unknown.

[10] The first of the satellite galaxies was appropriately named as the gateway to the Companions, and is cognate to Jinnaru, the first month of the galactic year, represented by the Guardian of the Gate.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

PROGENY

OF THE ELDER RACES

The Firstborn were comprised of the breathtaking Duinuogwuin; the extraordinary A'qavish-qerach; the remarkable Sephi; the shining Kwoth; the brilliant Gree; the modest Sharu; the valiant Mu-Abin; the advanced Q'rel; the magnificent Alashan; the solemn Ahra Naffi; the humble Kalai; the astonishing Killik; the awe-inspiring Tempestro; the patient Neti; the spiritual Aing-Tii; the wise Sunesi; the graceful Oswaft; the elegant Zendar; the vigorous Cathar; the energetic Sholam; the thoughtful Pelgrin; the compassionate Pa Tho; the gentle Asmerukii; the adventurous Kharubdian; the creative Xaxax; the scholarly Eellayin; the spirited Osserians; the sagacious Krevaaki; the innovative El'gusclar-fal'Mörtilspí; the peace-loving Caamasi; the inquiring Siniteen; the reverent Asogian; the visionary Hysalrian; the shrewd Dur Sabon; the crafty Celegian; the joyful Javan; the portentous Arrak; the ardent Arbran; the scopic Sicmoo; the faithful Xaczhick; the serene Tchuukthai; the daring Demmeonite; the boundless UrSkek; the enlightened Zeffonian; the adamant Eruthros; the trustworthy Talortai; the glorious Urey'la; the sensible Sumrian; the discreet K'kybak; the cerebral Pan-preneur; the mysterial Dranconian; the intrepid Altrusian; the perceptive Pulrista; the noble Filar; the inspiring Gaoul; the soulful Ka'aa; the amiable Kumumgah; the idiosyncratic Mloki; the beneficent Tor-Ohnahmi; the altruistic Indur; the sympathetic Felucian; the quixotic Kooroo; the beloved Dch'ichi; the dauntless Volgax; the unbounded Xadow; the methodical Vhorl—eighty in all who made up the Elder Races, hale and wise, as the Celestials passed on to them wisdom, justice, power and love, and worlds in which to thrive.[11]

The Celestials taught their offspring all they knew for the preparation of worlds for the new lifeforms to come. To aid in the development and expansion of the galaxy, the A'qavish-qerach, later known as the Lucent and Arachnitects, fashioned the Titans. But the raising of arabesque conurbations and magniloquent cities required no slaves

[11] Eighty Elder Races are known to have been, though there was some confusion in later times as to exactly who some of these were. Three races later identified as partly incarnate Valdilar and do not count. The Dch'ichi of Mysterii, rumoured to be favourites of the Celestials, were a vanished race, but they are rightly counted. While further confusion would emerge in later eras, with species such as the Ithorians innocently conflated with the Firstborn, and vanished races such as the Kooroo having their reputation co-opted by the Enemy, there was some consternation at the time regarding infiltrators such as the Muun who claimed to have originated in Mysterii. The Elder Races were uncertain of this, for the Muun were exceedingly unpleasant to behold, but as they were brilliant of mind, they overcame their prejudice.

nor yoke of hardship even, for the Precursors had such gifts then, leaving them free to focus on the art and architecture that suited their individual tastes.

Propaedeutics began for the Precursors, and the galaxy soon came to be filled with a multifarious assemblage of beings who were as beloved children to the Firstborn and scions to the Celestials.

Simian, felid, feliform, canid, caniform, mustelid, ursid, viverrid, avian, saurian, ungulate, and humanoid forms came to be, along with a mélange of ichthyoids, arthropods, and botanical races, to name but a few. Besides those based on already-existing shapes, new forms were invented that had never before been seen, inhabitants designed for the most inhospitable of worlds.

The Precursors took great delight in the anthropomorphic lagomorph, capra, rodent, and marmot races. And while some were simple and sweet, such as the Gashta, some were fashioned with an additional hortative purpose, such as the Bilar, whose overmind not only ensured peace amongst them but demonstrated to the galaxy the greater value of community.

The First Ones partook with one another the knowledge and gifts they each had, and thus they taught their hale offspring across the cosmic spectrum. The Gree were the first to give to the nascent galaxy portals that allowed the growing races to travel beyond their homes to any world of their choosing for the purpose of communion and the apportioning of knowledge, wisdom, crafts, goods, flora, and fauna, some of which became ubiquitous in variegated forms. As the Kwa and others followed, so did all begin to know their kindred amongst the stars, forging a galactic nexus of affinity and interdependence.

Food and resources grew in abundance on each world specific to the requirements and pleasures of each race, and with their shared expertise there was no end to the variety that could be brought forth. Love reigned supreme amongst the generations, for whom it was a somnolent Vernal Splendour, a golden age of elation, exploration, and peace in which dreams became reality. And all at this time paid reverence to their progenitors, the Celestials, and to the Father of Lights, the Prime Shaper of all.

OF WUTZEK

Of the four architects of Skyriver, Wutzek had been the most aggrieved by the actions of his treacherous cognates on the Dawn World. And of the Humans, he felt unwavering contempt, for they so readily fell prey to their deceptions. So he sought to fashion beings who would never falter but who would use their power to wisely direct the inhabitants of this new dimension.

Wutzek knew he should have informed Lluxos and the others of his intent, but a thought occurred to him that perhaps they would reject his idea—*But why should that be?* he wondered. He was every bit as sage as they, was he not? He needed no permission. Best to simply do what needed to be done. They would thank him later. Yet with this idea that he was doing something in secret came a rush of fractious and conflicting feelings—arrogance, resentment, frustration, and detachment—emotions that he had

not experienced before and did not particularly care for, and the sounds of dissonance were awakened in him. In his bitterness and antipathy, the eldritch song of discordance that had remained hidden within him so deep that he did not even know it was there now came pouring out into those entities which he brought into being.

Nebulous as swirls and splashes of color were his four offspring, alive with great untapped power, beautiful beyond imagining, and unique; but born as they were out of Wutzek's conflicting states, each took on some part of his disharmony and so required the others to remain in fragile balance. Thus, he named each after that which impelled their creation, and in so doing were they awoken.

The first was named Tilotny, which in the tongue of the Celestials meant speech, art, and pride. The second was called Horliss-Horliss, a derivation of one who is outside, timeless, and emancipating. The third was Cold Danda Sine, which denoted fiery dynamism and spirited passion as epitomized by the mystery and excitement of massless energy. Last but not least was Splendid Ap, a name belonging to the diagnostic principles of time, motion, and space.

Now that they'd been birthed, Wutzek felt a terrible pang of remorse. Whereas the Firstborn had been celebrated upon their nascency, these were born in secret, veiled in shadow, and they were not as the Firstborn but were more akin to the Celestials.

When Lluxos, Marutz, and Xurz arrived in Wutzek's presence, having felt the potency of his creations, Wutzek plaintively confessed all he'd done. "I fear that due to my anger and pride, I have given shape to beings unnatural, and from this terrible mistake, a shadow will cover the suns of our universe so that the very thing which I sought to prevent will come to pass." Beset by grief, he added, "If this is the case, then I should unmake my progeny and forestall this calamity."

Lluxos responded, "Do not be as hasty in destruction as you were in creation."

In shame, Wutzek looked to his offspring, only to discover that they were no longer there. In horror, he scanned the universe but could not find them. "Now matters are worse! How can they have disappeared? Have my very thoughts unmade them?"

"Although he does not fully understand his unique gift," intoned Marutz, seeking intently beyond the ovum of their dimension, "the one you call Splendid Ap has taken his siblings beyond time into the In-Between world from which he has opened a window. There, they risk leaving a future imprint of themselves."

"Tractable though this dimension of ours may be, this cannot be done without consequence," Wutzek emphasized.

"Indeed, it cannot," Xurz agreed, "for they have now inextricably interacted in grave matters, imprinting upon peoples and places that have not yet come to be so that when the continuum catches up to this event, as it now must, it will split, forcing into being a second universe, an echo of our own."

"For this reason did we put measures in place," noted Lluxos grimly. "Nevertheless, this is unforeseen and unfortunate, as this second dimension will unfold in its own fashion and require great attention."

"We are hardly the only Celestials in the universe," Marutz replied. "We will put out the call for others to provide aid."

"We have seen what comes of those realms that are governed by those who did not create them," Lluxos reminded her.

"Powerful we may be, but to divide ourselves between two such realms would be to benefit neither," she noted.

"Let us consider the options," Xurz said, "suitable to this Echo Dimension."

Lluxos lifted his hand. "As we speak, Splendid Ap has recognized his error and more carefully anchored himself and his siblings to a point that will shortly arrive. There, they will remain until the time-stream organically catches up to them, though for them it will seem as if barely a moment has passed. You will see your offspring then." Lluxos had been given the gift of farsight and could see a potential glimpse at that time, but he did not tell Wutzek what he saw, for it was a grievous sight.

"Also, they have given themselves interesting forms," Marutz stated, as she projected their frozen images before them. Tilotny had garbed herself in the most striking of sapient forms, female, Elven, alluring and unyielding as the sea. Horliss-Horliss represents himself as formless mass, surrealistic and dreamlike. Cold Danda Sine is embodied as an arresting black orb with a face akin to burning lava flows upon an impenetrable penumbra. Splendid Ap is represented by abstraction, having shaped himself as a pyramidal strobiloid in the flux of change.

Wutzek contemplated this. "They were intended to embody love, justice, power, and wisdom, but they emerged flawed so that if even one is absent, they will be out of balance, and from them will come instead egotism, frustration, madness, and apathy."

"This event is rife with ominous portent and reverberations of other times and places," stated Xurz. "Inexperienced as they are and bereft of love and guidance, there is much harm they might do."

"Should we not implore the Supreme Maker to will this terrible thing away?" Wutzek inquired despondently.

"You know the answer to this already," replied Marutz. "It is not the will of the One to force any to choose love, peace, justice, and wisdom, lest those things not exist but only the domination of mindless servitude."

"Thus is the gift of freedom higher still," Xurz added, "and the greatest response: to find the sacredness in all living things… even when they are flawed."

"Broken they may be," Marutz noted, "but none are born without conscience. We will go forth to speak with them."

"They will have little love for us after the hateful and foolish words I spoke," Wutzek contemplated, "and struggle to know light from darkness…" He was yet stricken, knowing his progeny would be the cause of great heartache and tribulation. "I did not think wisely or well when I did this, and I do not know how I will bear it."

Lluxos turned to him, shining his light upon Wutzek's adumbrated globules. "Take heart! The Father of Lights had warned us that the shadow would seek to enter our realm. I am not certain if these offspring are connected to that vision, but we knew aforetime that an era of evil would arise in which many things would come about and be tested; in this way will it be demonstrated for all time that love and compassion are the path to light and life, and apathy and hate, the roads to darkness and death. And whosoever follows the shadow walks the path of ruination."

"I did not imagine the shadow would come out of me!"

"It does not originate with you," Xurz assured him. "You but played its refrain."

"Would that we could eradicate all darkness with our light," Wutzek intoned.

Marutz spread out her polychromic rays. "One day… For now, all things serve a purpose, though our adversaries pervert them. Within darkness lies anger, fear, and the tegument of light; but without anger, there could not be the indignation of justice; without fear, there would not be the avoidance of danger; without the umbra of night, there could not be rejuvenation and rest, nor healing and contemplation. This is why the light waxes and wanes… but we were made to walk in the light."

"As for you, Wutzek," concluded Lluxos, "you are a beloved and blazing star. Though I sense great trials lay before you, you will yet bring forth offspring again, howbeit, the parturition will occur differently than before."

Xurz extended his refulgent beam towards Wutzek. "Though war will supplant love as king, with death and grief his offspring, it will not be to the end all life, but the wakening of protectors. Put aside your shame and grief, for one of your own has returned to seek you out."

There was much that was spoken between Horliss-Horliss and Wutzek at this time.

In the Grand Convocation of the Celestials that followed, the brilliance of Lluxos and his companions shone brighter than before as they opened themselves in euphonious accordance with a received vision that was henceforth known as the Prophecy of the Restoration. It was recorded and preserved in the writings of the Ancient Order of the Whills, coming down through the ages in the much-abbreviated form called the Prophecy of the Chosen One. In the original form, it read:

> And in the times of greatest despair,
> Born of the fire, born of the air,
> There shall arise the saviors,
> Born of the earth, born of waters,
> Defenders of the blameless ones,
> And he shall be the Son of Suns,
> And she the Daughter of the Stars,
> To break the fetters, chains, and bars,
> Not soldiers' swords nor wizards' spell,
> Nor kings or queens or hosts of Hell,
> Will thwart the Children of the Light,
> Champions and Companions Knight,
> So evening turns to golden morn,
> As ice dissolves when spring's reborn,
> Let joy rise up from grief and woe,
> From evil's death, new life will grow,
> And all who loved will be re-made,
> Whether great or small, beast or babe,
> The end of death and pain and rage,
> As once it was in the Dawn Age….

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THEIR COLD SOVEREIGNTY

OF TILOTNY

Of the four of Wutzek's progeny, Tilotny had awoken first to observe all the beauty and grandeur of the galactic gardens around her and the beings that dwelt there. Her own form was as yet amorphous, and thinking it pale and small in comparison, she felt a sense of shame and dismay. Furthermore, she could hear a grand discourse between the one who'd made her and his cohorts, lofty entities of swirling lights. Perceiving that she was less wise than those speaking, she tried to hide the fact that she'd awoken and behaved as one somnambulant.

It was then that she heard her maker speak her name, followed by the names of those who must be her siblings, and she felt the love and connection between them. In the next instant, however, she was struck by a stab of fear. A great evil was about to come upon them! And in her heart, she felt terror and loathing, distraught in the knowledge that death would come from the one who'd given them life.

Before she knew it, she, Horliss-Horliss, Cold Danda Sine, and Splendid Ap whisked away to *elsewhere*. For but too brief a moment, as if in a vision, Tilotny glimpsed the deathless lands: Bathed in shades of verdigris, a carpet of genuflecting trees wreathed in the bleeding golds and reds of the rising sun gave way to the ocherous mountains and cinnabar citadels that soared up past the horizon in minarets of

dolomite and rutilant ores to far-off, agate clouds like the ascent of parhelion rocs with the first light of the flower moon. There, on elegant cygnus-ships, as a musical breeze played through their rich caftans and long, aigretted hair, ineffable movers floated along a rippling river that ran winding betwixt the indesecrate, emerald laurels and forest-faun.

Though saddened at the passing of that empyreal vision, only to arrive at a misty, inchoate world, Tilotny came alive to the sudden freedom of power she felt, and shaped her form into that of the most beautiful of beings she'd espied from afar, determining that she would never again be less than any other.

Horliss-Horliss, whom she perceived as a powerful metastyler not unlike herself, now threw a shape for himself, a null inversion of standard form that was spectral and liquescent in appearance. It secretly alarmed her, for she had never conceived of it before, and this confounded her newfound belief in her supremacy. How could he even imagine that such a design was greater than hers? Besides, she was first!

Next came Cold Danda Sine, who threw a shape, an anti-conceptual one of an empty unlit sphere with a fiery face; he spoke wild things of the pleasures of the void that she didn't yet understand. She would soon find out what these things were and put them to use.

Splendid Ap came last, taking a flickering, conical shape and speaking even odder things of equations and formulae. She didn't think such things had comparable value, but she could sense the potential in him. In all, she loved and feared her siblings, but the voice inside her said she was a goddess and must rule them.

Upon this inchoate world, Tilotny descried from afar inchoate people. Reckoning that she was the loveliest of all creatures, she decided that she must also be the wisest, for a strange interior voice whispered this to her, telling her she had begat all things. Thus, she determined that it must be so, and for this reason had the jealous beings of shimmering lights been seeking to harm her. She would do whatever was necessary to ensure her survival in the face of this existential threat!

Arguing her supremacy with Horliss-Horliss had grown tiresome by the time a tiny mover appeared on the surface of the ground before them. What had been indistinct earlier resolved into clear forms, leaving Tilotny abashed to see a Human creature that bore a shape similar to hers (though not as beautiful in her estimation). Horliss-Horliss asked if Tilotny had, in fact, shaped the tiny mover. And perhaps she had. Was she not *the goddess*, after all, shaper of all the up-and-down things that were substance and form? Even time must be of her making, for the voice hinted as much. That she had no memory of having done so concerned her, but she pushed it aside.

Three other tiny movers arrived, each covered in a white shell and sharing the same form. After her siblings mocked her for her redundancy, Tilotny changed one of the white-shelled ones into diamond. But upon so doing, it suddenly became an unliving thing. Horliss-Horliss thought a more subtle refinement would prove better and altered the heart of the first mover into diamond. It too died. This was shocking to her, but when she realized that this was what the Being of Lights had sought to do to them, she

steeled herself to it. Tilotny had to prove herself more artful, and so she entwined the other two into one screaming, multi-limbed form that soon died as well.

Cold Danda Sine called it tasteless, and Horliss-Horliss said it was disorderly. Tilotny was forced to admit that it was, and in the deepest part of her heart she felt a sickening premonition that disturbed her. She pushed it aside. *A goddess must be strong*, she reasoned. Is that not what her own thoughts told her? Yet there was another voice that emanated from deep within which warned her to avoid this strange voice and do what was good and right, but when Horliss-Horliss ordered her to tidy up the mess, she grew angry and shunted it away. No one ordered her! With that, she commanded Splendid Ap to do it.

So Tilotny departed, wondering at the role of a goddess.

OF HORLISS–HORLISS

When Horliss-Horliss awoke, he saw his progenitor, a Being of great pastel, corposant lights, and heard him pronounce his name. He paid attention to the discussion that ensued between this progenitor and other beings akin to him, and he heard him wonder if their unmaking might be best for the galaxy. Horliss-Horliss felt it was wrong that he should suffer such a thing when he had only just been born.

Before he knew it, Splendid Ap reached out to his siblings and him, and they *shifted* to elsewhere in time and space. The unsettling experience brought his gaze to a spatial sea of chrysolite and cerulean flame, a damassin belt in the midmost sky where diurnal rays beamed forth in ethereous bands of hyaline garnet and mottled gyres; he moved to plummet its opalescent depths, to bathe in its blithe and azure-stippled pools, but he was whisked away again. Safe for the moment from the one who sought to destroy them, they each took their forms, with Horliss-Horliss topiarized as a nacre, noctilucent nebula of lambent, silvern blaze in ever-changing composition.

Tilotny was elated to be free, though her first words to him were boasts that she'd invented shape, substance, and time! *Impossible*, for he recalled there were others in the other places, and he knew his shape was of his own design. Perhaps she did not understand the concept of time. A strange voice muttered in his mind that he was a god who should rule above all, but he immediately dismissed the notion as foolish. Shortly after, another being appeared on the planet below: a tiny mover. *Could Tilotny have actually made this one?* The voice told him she had, but he wasn't sure. Others arrived, three in identical white shells. Tilotny turned one into diamond. The sensation he felt then unnerved him, but irked by Tilotny's vanity, he determined to demonstrate how to produce a less ostentatious change. So he turned the soft, pulsing interior organ of the first mover into the same elegant but hard substance. Suddenly, that tiny mover ceased to move as well, and Horliss-Horliss felt a light go out.

This must be death, he thought, and for the first time Horliss-Horliss felt remorse. He learned something about the universe then, recognizing that if it was wrong for *his* light to be put out, so too was it wrong for the lights of *others* to be put out.

Tilotny, seemingly oblivious to such notions, coiled the other two into one ugly mass, and small lights flickered out there as well. This was a grotesque disorder.

Since she claimed the tiny mover as her own, she should repair it, but she would not, and this told him something too. Splendid Ap opened a gate for them in time, and they left to a place where shapes and forms dwelt peacefully on every world. Scrying Tilotny's calculating envy and Cold Danda Sine's hungry exuberance, he urged caution, explaining that he understood something he hadn't before: "The tiny movers of these lands are in many ways like us, possessing desires and fears. As we do not wish to be interfered with, neither do they."

"Can you not see that these are *lesser* beings," Tilotny countered, "neither as powerful nor as wise as we, and in need of our guidance?"

"Ambitious Tilotny, surely you do not still believe that you are their maker!" Cold Danda Sine interjected. "They have their own makers—the Celestials I perceive they are called—to guide them."

"And as we are each different, it is likely that they are not all the same either," Horliss-Horliss reasoned.

"Uncomprehending ones, you fail to understand! *That* is the reason we must save the tiny movers. We are meant to be their makers! For this reason had we been brought forth ere the betrayal we suffered; for this reason did the Celestials wish to see us destroyed. We are meant to supplant them and make this galaxy our home."

That sounded reasonable to all of her siblings, but Horliss-Horliss admitted that he did not have all the answers.

What he did know was that he no longer wished to play with shapes and forms in the presence of other living beings, for as he listened to Tilotny's plan, he perceived they did not really hold the same concern for the tiny movers. *And what of myself? Governed by pride, what might* I *bring upon the worlds?* Another voice deep inside him said that in his absence, many lights would flicker out, and a blanket of darkness would cover the expanse so that nothing would be left but the volatile speech of Tilotny, the cold sovereignty of Cold Danda Sine, and the temporal chaos of Splendid Ap.

He no longer trusted himself or his siblings. Although a part of him said that he should stay to watch over them, what he did instead was create a null inversion. Here was a better option. He said to them: "Come with me, my siblings, and let us enter this place I have made that is uninhabited, a realm of our own imagining which we can claim as our own. Let us have nothing to do with these outsiders, great or small."

"An empty, shapeless place," Tilotny remarked with a look of revulsion.

"We can each give it shape," he replied.

"And so gild the cage of our making…" Tilotny turned away.

When they each declined in turn, he said: "I will neither oppose you nor be induced to take part in your designs," and so, with considerable apprehension, he departed discouraged for the lonely realm he'd fashioned.

OF COLD DANDA SINE

Ah, the thrill of it all! Cold Danda Sine burned with the fire of *life! Newness! Energy! Motion!* All things excited him. When he heard that he was to be destroyed, he thought, *How extraordinary destruction must be!*

But it was not to be. Inestimable Splendid Ap took them somewhere incomparably scintillant beyond measure, a scoriac and preternatural purlieu of russet scaurs and violescent tamaracks, a great roaring mountain eructing Cimmerian clouds, sinuous with rufous, saltent runlets. Into its great maw, he wended to peregrinate as one mad with nympholepsy, but too soon they were somewhere *else*. This was all exciting and upsetting and fascinating and disturbing!

By means of an anti-concept, he threw himself a shape, a black and hollow orb with rivulets of basalt firelight and scorching magma etching the expressions of his face against ebon space!

Tilotny was truly stunning, but her boasts quickly grew old, and he thought it would be amusing to antagonize her! Horliss-Horliss was a wild thing! *Is this my maker and the maker of all things?* He had memories of another, but he did not put stock in old and upsetting things, and Horliss-Horliss was before him now in all his splendor! But no, his sister, Tilotny, claimed to have made matter and time. He did not think so. She was an expert metastyler like Horliss-Horliss, but she did not conceive the anti-concepts, for that was Cold Danda Sine's own specialty, and he grew anxious to bring more to bear!

But what is this? A new form! A tiny mover crept upon the surface of the earth. *Horliss-Horliss must be the maker after all!* But no, again he denied it, and again dull Tilotny took the credit. But then three other identical movers appeared! *If Tilotny had shaped them, she was repetitive!*

In a flash, Tilotny turned the little mover into a dead thing. Horliss-Horliss followed suit, ending the life of the first tiny one! *How bizarre and upsetting!* Tasteless Tilotny proved she could repeat this skill by making the others unmoving too. This disturbed him greatly, for he perceived that it was unjust and evil, and he longed to avenge them, but a strange voice quietly murmured to him that it was exciting to watch such drama unfold. In a way, it was. Conflicting feelings raged inside him.

I can do much better things, he thought, *new, antithetical things!* Horliss-Horliss and Tilotny argued about restoring the lifeless ones. *Is life and death as casual as this?* Cold Danda Sine felt both repelled and fascinated. He did not want part in this grotesque drama. And yet, the voice said such was the way of the worlds; it was ugly and cruel, but he was above it all, for he was a god, and the worlds were his to play with, whatever he craved… novelty, contest, games!

Splendid Ap, who struggled with ups and downs and backwards and forwards but was a better shaper than dull Tilotny, opened a door, and Cold Danda Sine rushed through it! *Ah, a realm teeming with greater and lesser beings!* Tilotny sought their worship, and that made him think of their maker. Cold Danda Sine did not wish to

think upon that one. At last, his vain sister was making sense, for she sought to avenge the evil that had nearly befallen them at the hands of these jealous, greedy Celestials!

Horliss-Horliss proposed instead that they depart for a pristine dreamworld, a null inversion of his making whereupon no other lifeforms existed. To Cold Danda Sine's ears, this sounded dreary and futile. He had great love for Horliss-Horliss, but it was not in his nature to withdraw into the obscurity of hollow spaces. Nevertheless, he felt grief-stricken when his sibling declared that he would depart from them. *Do you understand now?* the strange voice seemed to say. *Better not to think, for that will only enervate you*. Thus, did Cold Danda Sine discard cogitations, perceiving now that perhaps there was no maker of movers, and even if there was, it didn't matter. *I will enjoy myself, for there is much to do and a whole galaxy in which to do it!*

OF SPLENDID AP

Tilotny was the first to register a threat to her person. Horliss-Horliss wondered at the meaning of it. Cold Danda Sine felt it would be a sublime joy to experience. Discerning powerful emotions of terror, consternation, and excitement emanating from his agnates and construing the danger before them, Splendid Ap *connected* with his siblings and *moved* them out of the way. Ap was new to life and did not yet fully understand his powers, but he knew that travelling through space would not avail them freedom, for the one who constructed him was powerful. He and his siblings came to stop at a luminous window Ap had opened and peered for a moment outside the dimensional walls that enclosed the elliptical realm to a wondrous land, but he could venture no further, repelled by a perilous force that none could surmount.

Perhaps he could project forward through time, but if time itself could not be skipped they would be frozen at that moment until the stream of time arrived at a future point. And what if the stream did not go according to his projection? There were trillions of directions in which the continuum might flow. No, he'd need another option to ensure they would not be caught or disappear from reality.

But if he couldn't travel *through* time, maybe he could travel *out* of it instead.

In a place in which there was no time, Ap appeared. He could see windows laid out before him like equations. He'd have liked to have examined them all, but he felt that he did not have time and intuited that the dozen strange beings guarding them might not allow it. As this took place outside of time and space, his siblings were not cognizant of what was occurring, immersed as they were in empyreal visions of the Unseen Realm. Then he perceived a mind not unlike his own.

"Where is this?" he asked of it.

"Nowhere and everywhere," a familiar voice said. "It is In-Between."

"If there is no time in this place, perhaps we may hide here."

"No," the invisible voice replied, "only I may reside here, for I am out of the worlds, but you are yet of them."

"Where, then, can we go where we will not be found?" Ap asked.

"From here you can go anywhere, but that which you fear will always find you."

"From a window we will travel to a point far ahead when we are long forgotten."

"No future is guaranteed," the invisible voice stated, "but the past once written cannot be unwritten. You have powers of which you do not yet understand. Know only that they come with consequences, some beneficial, some detrimental; if you attempt to change what has been, you will only create a new stream, an echo of the original that will follow its own path."

"Our interest is only in the future, not the past," he assured the voice.

Moving forward into the projection of the future, they appeared above a far-off astronomical body orbiting a central, self-luminous heat source around which several other planetary bodies revolved. Because this was only a best estimation of what the future might be, it was a strange and shadowy realm.

He tried to explain to his perturbed and quarrelsome cognates all that had transpired by demonstrating how they'd traversed the six states, showing a simple progress of his position in the past, present, future, matter, space, and nonexistence: "It is a tabula rasa of interlaced solace in a parallax of perpetuity," but his words and illustration only made them think he was confused.

That was when he saw one of the tiny movers. Splendid Ap tried to convey his concern, but they imagined that he was being silly and unduly worried, and returned to their arguments over the nature of form and things which he perceived had far lesser value. Perhaps the tiny mover would move on. But then they saw it too, and, disturbingly, it resolved into a clearer picture!

The tiny mover was a female being of some kind. *What were the chances that of all immense space and time, she would arrive on this barren planet in this barren sector of space at this very moment? Infinitesimally small*, he realized. Calculating the odds, he concluded that any specified event whose probability is less than 1 chance in 10^{150} is altogether improbable if not outright impossible.

What it all meant was something he'd have to ponder later, as the female wasn't alone. She was being pursued by three males covered in some form of protective plating. Their violent intent was clear enough.

As a result of his siblings' absurd attempts to demonstrate their individual superiority, Tilotny turned one into a solid form of carbon with a crystalline structure. Horliss-Horliss followed suit, turning the female's heart into diamond so that she perished—and the doorways vanished from before her. Splendid Ap was not a creature that could readily comprehend sorrow, so he did not grieve her per se, but he did perceive that this was a violation of sorts. Two of the beings that had pursued her were also transformed into a single, unliving mass—and as they died, the doorways vanished before them.

This is not the time or place for this!

Horliss-Horliss seemed to feel remorse over this too and requested that they depart once Tilotny corrected the problem. Tilotny gave the task to him, he whom she called "stupid!" Horliss-Horliss seconded the request. He objected. *If you believe I am so unintelligent, why would you leave so difficult an assignment to me?* But it fell on deaf ears. Very well. He could practice his abilities at least.

First, he had to remove his siblings from here. The emotional component in his decisions puzzled him. Best not to tell his cognates any of what had occurred or they would just call him stupid again. He was not yet convinced that emotions were beneficial and pondered if they might be more of a hindrance. He clamped down on these now and concentrated, finding the door back to that nowhere point in space and time. He'd have to try something different. *Ah*! he thought. *That is the answer!*

After tracing a path, he then *pushed* them forward to a time just a bit further in the future from when they'd been created. This time, he embedded them to the stream itself so that no matter where it organically travelled, it would come to them, as he now knew better how to graft unto the riding maelstrom that was the continuum. This would mean that they would be suspended in frozen limbo until time organically caught up to them, but with an understanding of his powers came a greater confidence that they'd be able to protect themselves.

Once that was accomplished, he proceeded to raise the dead up from the ground. Of the tiny movers, he found it was not a difficult thing to restore them to the way they had been just before he'd encountered them. He did not think to alter their memories, but he could repair what was going to be broken by rewinding their body clocks to the time before they were injured.

These are of no consequence, said a strange voice, different from the one he'd previously spoken to. *Why waste your powers on such trivialities*? He ignored it. Pondering the quantum possibilities, for Ap tended to think mathematically, he calculated that he could remove the male pursuers far away so that they could not harm the female or themselves, for it would be disconcerting to fix them only for them to become unliving again.

He opened up a particular door backwards, which led to other corridors and doors, in infinite sequence; his vision clarified to a single point at the end of one of the infinitely long corridors, and he *pushed* the belligerent male pursuers into it. How they fared after that was up to them, but he realized he may have pushed too far! He would have to do better with the female…

Suddenly, he remembered that he was not supposed to leave any imprint on the continuum! He'd been warned that tampering with intrinsic and irresolute laws would create an anomalous echo, but he realized that there would already be consequences for what his siblings had done. *You are of far greater intelligence than they*, said the strange voice in his mind. Ap doubted that, though it did cause him to ponder where he belonged in the larger scheme of things. *Do I even belong*? He wondered. His maker seemed to think not. What of his argumentative agnates who knew nothing of such dilemmas? Ap perceived only this: despite their conflicts, they needed each other.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SHAPES OF THINGS TO COME

THE GOLDEN MAN AND THE METAL STUMP

Ap's next task was to restore the female, and once that was accomplished, he was gratified to watch as she walked off, bewildered at all that had just transpired. He prepared to depart as well when two odd entities ambled up to him. They had been left behind on the female's transport while the armored soldiers had pursued her: one was a bipedal, golden-metallic being, and the other, a squat, dome-shaped one. Neither was organic… and yet they bore all the aspects of life. Curiosity got the better of Ap, and, remembering that he was yet in a state of timelessness, he opted to see if he could better apprehend matters.

Discerning that the shorter of the two was calm and sensible, he addressed him: "Are you an ambulatory tree stump bound in metal?"

["I am a modified astromech droid produced by Industrial Automaton,"] said the metal stump in his Binary language, which Splendid Ap was surprised to find he understood. ["What have you done with our female companion? I know she came this way. If you have harmed her in any way, you will regret it!"] It was clear the mechanized stump had strong emotions for her, but how could an… *Intellex IV cognitive module*, which he detected was the droid's "brain," generate such emotions?

"You need not worry. She had been… *accidentally* damaged by another. But I have repaired her, and she is returning to her vessel. Yet before I leave, it would benefit me to have some added knowledge, for I am new to this world."

"Oh my," bewailed the golden automaton. "Did he say, *damaged*? I must insist we leave here at once! This is no time for lessons!"

"What is the name of this world we are upon?" Ap asked.

"It is called Bedlam," the Golden Man answered, "and it is best avoided due to the stories of strange and terrifying apparitions that appear here from time to time. We really should be going!"

"My cognates and I are those apparitions."

"Dear, oh dear!"

["What manner of being are you?"] the astromech asked, instructing his counterpart to be silent.

"I am known only as Splendid Ap. Beyond that I cannot speculate at this time. Is the anxious being next to you a Human Being dipped in gold?"

["No, he is a protocol droid created on Affa one hundred and twelve years ago by Cybot Galactica. He was later dismantled and rebuilt thirty-two years ago. He is an idiot, though I care and look after him."]

Ignoring the protocol droid's returned insults, Ap responded, "I believe that is how my cognates view me as well… The Golden Man's anxieties and your concern for the female appear to be genuine emotions. How is this possible?"

["I do not know. That question has been asked by philosophers and students of metaphysics since our kind first came into being."]

"I see now that there are many more questions than there is time for answers," concluded Ap. "You and your companions have entered at a point in which there is a bridge between worlds, the original and the one that I replicated a short time ago. It had not been my intent to do so, but our interactions with your Human have forced into being a new physical realm that is analogous to your own, a kind of echo."

["I have heard rumors of such things."]

"If what this *Ap* creature says is true," the Golden Man fretted, "we must get out of here before we're trapped!"

"You need not fear on that account!" This had been spoken by a striking, winged crystal being about the size of Splendid Ap who glided down before them. "You have entered a *paradoxisphere*, a crossing of worlds and times within which the hours do not pass. Temporal paradoxes and hidden openings to the In-Between are exceedingly rare but necessary to ensure the stability of the temporal shift. Once Splendid Ap returns to his time, events will continue as they should."

"You are the being with whom I spoke earlier," Ap stated.

"I am Hidden Pithem," the being replied. "When first you created Hyperion, I came about, as did my wicked sibling, along with…"

"If I might interject," the protocol droid interrupted, "according to Mistress Mnemos, who knows a great deal about such things…" The astromech chirruped in annoyance. "Yes, I know you know things too, showoff! That is *not* the point! From what we have been made to understand, our galaxy was brought about by the extra-dimensional Celestials. If I interpret you correctly, you are telling us that you made a second galaxy… That seems rather… *foolhardy*, if you don't mind my saying."

"There were some who felt similarly," replied the offspring of Ap, "fearing it would disrupt the interwoven fabric of the first. But there were others who believed it might be made to serve a beneficial end, a demonstration of how the original patterns might manifest in different ways. They arrived soon after to see what they could do with the Echo Dimension. Indeed, without their investment, it would have only ever been hollow and sterile, a pale and broken imitation of a far greater realm…"

"You have all assisted me a great deal," Splendid Ap said hastily, "but I must rejoin my siblings. And you, offspring, what is your path?"

"I must remain hidden for the time being, but we shall see each other again. As to you," addressing the droids, "you have alighted upon a unique position; I do not speak of time and space. Normally, you would not be permitted to traverse its windows, for you would be misplaced, but I have now seen to it that you will never long be lost in time. Goodbye, R2-D2 and C-3PO."

When time caught up with Ap and his cognates (what was but micro-seconds), Horliss-Horliss was arguing issues of ethics with Tilotny, who countered by claiming their superiority and destiny to rule. He proposed going to a new world of their own

imagining, but this was not the desire of Tilotny or Cold Danda Sine. Splendid Ap suggested they inhabit Hyperion, but no one else thought this a wise course. Horliss-Horliss announced that he would depart from them. *Was it disdain or fear that prompted this? Should I accompany him?* Ap thought hard but ascertained—based on the highest likelihood of acquiring what he needed—that the best course would be to remain with Tilotny and Cold Danda Sine, reasoning that alongside them he would acquire ultimate knowledge, whereas an empty realm would profit him little. The issue of morality that Horliss-Horliss was so concerned with did not seem to be of such great importance at the time—and time was something he knew so little of.

STRANGE ROADS

Tilotny and her siblings were approached at this time by Lluxos, who imparted the remorse Wutzek felt for having rashly uttered so terrible a thing, and offered them the opportunity of joining the Celestials and learning from them. For but a moment they perceived the harmony, warmth, and joy that unification with those of their kind would bring, but Tilotny snuffed out such feelings and offered a noncommittal response.

Later, she warned Ap and Sine that this was likely a ruse designed by their sire to fulfill his intent to unmake them. Deep down she felt uncertain about this, but a part of her feared that allying with the Celestials would mean laying down her claim to godhood and returning to a quotidian state. So she allowed suspicion to pervert the Celestials' sincere offer of love and friendship in favor of a fiction that her greatness was feared by them. She would claim her rightful place in the galaxy.

For his part, Cold Danda Sine did not trust anyone, but Tilotny was the devil he knew. Splendid Ap was uncertain as well, but logic dictated that if one of the Celestials wished them harm—and these beings were united—then all of them might wish them harm. Although yet without malice, they were as unruly children who did not fully comprehend matters of good and evil. With Horliss-Horliss absent, however, they grew imbalanced and more strongly prone towards a selfish course.

Not yet as vain or manipulative as she was to become, Tilotny was, nonetheless, cunning and determined. Fearful that her remaining siblings might consider departing from her, she promised to Splendid Ap boundless knowledge, and to Cold Danda Sine the opportunity to bring forth new things without constraint. "First, we must establish our own realm," she stated. "I am wary of the eyes of the Celestials upon us. Let us establish a world in which we cannot be so easily observed."

"Our brother previously fashioned one," Sine remarked. "Perhaps it is time to pay him a visit and see if it is suitable for our needs."

Tilotny, Splendid Ap, and Cold Danda Sine sought out and entered into the null inversion that Horliss-Horliss had earlier created only to discover that he was not there. This proved disappointing, but Tilotny refused to allow herself and her siblings to fall into despondency. "Let us prepare it to our liking for our habitation."

"Our brother's hand alone did not shape this realm," Sine noted.

"Correct. The Children of the A'qavish-qerach have endowed it with unique architecture," Ap added. "But they are no longer here."

"Vast though this expanse is, I sense no trace of any currently inhabiting it."

"No matter." Tilotny swirled, fashioning the foundations of her own demesne. "Perhaps when Horliss-Horliss returns, he will be pleased with our designs and see that we have not been idle." So she shaped the portion of her realm with a singular aspect of beauty. It was called Shumath-Ghun.[12]

Cold Danda Sine cast his anti-concept into a vast boreal estate he called Z'lykarior.

But for Ap, his odd dwelling housed a hidden portal that he would use to access a secret realm of his making that he would call Apeiron. But his dwelling place in Illathurion was known as Ap'Orgomon, for which reason he was himself later regarded as Aforgomon by those few that revered him. His dwelling place exists in angled time and is now regarded as Tindalos, which means the "realm of spirits," since it was to this purgatorial place that he sent the dead of Apeiron, but the tenacious hounds who serve as guardians of that realm arose from an unspeakable deed done at the beginning, their foulness expressed in angles.

The children of Wutzek gave their dimension a name, and in that long-forgotten tongue it was called *Illathurion*, which some discerned to mean the *Veiled* or *Hidden Fortress*, but with the arrival of the Charnel Worlds, with which it was conflated, and over the long years, it came to be called different things by different peoples at different times. Luke Skywalker would refer to it as the Anti-Force, for he surmised that from this occluded space derived power for the darkest invultuations. Others knew it as Ur Space, Thirdspace, the Warp, the Realm of Spirits, the Plane of Oblivion, the Void, the Space between Spaces, the Shadow Vale, the Night Realm, Trinta, the Serpent Universe, the Eldritch Abyss, the Dark Aether, the Netherworld, and other murky appellations. Fashioned as a vast inland empire beyond the mundane reaches of Realspace and the phantasmic tunnels of Hyperspace, it was an inverted galaxy obscured by powerful spells intended to keep hidden from the Celestials from whom they wished to remain separate.

What they did not fully comprehend then was that their province was unprotected from the prying eyes and grasping reach of *others* not as benevolent as the Celestials. Proud as they were of their inverse cosmos of strangely colored nebulae strewn amidst a charcoal and crimson firmament, they remained unaware of its vulnerability to a breach from other realms. So, Illathurion later came to be ravelled with many insular pockets, immured regions, scatheful seines, and tunnels to even stranger provinces.

As no Celestials had come to accost them during this period, the three felt free to traverse the galaxy for a time, observing all of the Elder Races and the ways in which the Celestials served as their bulwark. It was Sine who first noticed it: "The tiny mover that we saw in the inchoate place—there are *none* of her kind in this realm."

Splendid Ap tried to explain, "That was a projection of a future in which we should not have interfered."

"Perhaps they emerge later as a hybrid of other races," Tilotny pondered. "What of those in the place we glimpsed?"

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[12] *Shumath-Ghun*—literally, "Goddess' End," which meant the resting place of the goddess.

"I saw no peoples in that realm," Sine stated.

"You each saw that which most appealed to you," Ap elucidated. "The ones that Tilotny espied are known in Skyriver as the Sephi."

"Are they kin of a kind?"

"I do not believe so," Ap asserted. "The tiny movers you had me restore are known as Human Beings. They are sexually compatible with but unrelated to the Sephi or, for that matter, any other race. And you are correct. There are none in this realm."

"I wish to see the place from whence they came!" demanded Tilotny.

"Do they not come from *you*?" Sine charged, sneering. "You *claimed* to have made all things!"

"We were newly born then," Tilotny countered, "and knew only that we were intended to rule. But our father, who feared that we would supplant him, sought to unmake us. When he failed, his brother, our uncle, came to see if he might pacify us. Once bridled, we would be yoked to their order and never see our destiny fulfilled."

"I believe there may be some truth to this," Splendid Ap offered.

"Be that as it may, what does it have to do with the Humans?" Sine asked.

"It is my belief that *we* are responsible for bringing them here at some future time," Tilotny proclaimed, but then more softly she added, "though for what purpose I cannot yet discern. But if that is the case, then I was right and I *am*, in a sense, their maker in *this* realm."

But Cold Danda Sine only harrumphed.

THE PRIMARY DIMENSION

Splendid Ap considered the powers he possessed. "I perceive that surveyance can be accomplished." He transported them to Ap'Orgomon, where he transformed into a large nine-sided chamber with which he surrounded his siblings. Upon each wall, a dazzling panoply of moving pictures played across numerous windows around them. "Roads of ethereality and roads of corporeity cross at various junctures," Ap stated, pink and purple hues now glowed and oscillated up and down his frame, signifying his excitement at having learned a new thing of value. "Ultimately, *all* doors stem from the Primary World," he announced.

The windows continued to scan various portions of this realm, some beautiful, some terrible. "What is to prevent us crossing over?" asked Tilotny.

"I do not know," Splendid Ap responded. "Dimensional traverse appears impeded by laws that prevent that very thing."

"Can you circumvent them?" she inquired, aware that he was already looking into it.

"It is possible for one such as me to do so," he replied, "but impossible to determine what, if any, temporal consequences might result. It is also unnecessary. A bridge was previously made in the time-space continuum."

"Your doing, no doubt!" Sine chuckled.

"A reasonable assertion, but no. In this case, the Celestials had earlier forged the passage… They themselves transferred via certain worlds now deemed sacred. I

should be able to replicate their bridge without causing a temporal paradox or requiring us to utilize the conveyance of those worlds."

"Of course! Are we not gods?" Tilotny asked.

"I do not think we are," Sine replied.

"Then what are we?" Ap asked.

"We are something else."

"Then we shall *become* gods," Tilotny promised, "and *our* universe will thank us for it… Come," she invited, "let us cross the threshold and see what we shall see."

Obeying her command, Ap transformed a window into a Transdimensional Gate.

What is so special about these lands when compared to the mysteries of Illathurion, Skyriver, or the Hidden Worlds? There must be more here than meets the eye! This was the first thought that Cold Danda Sine had when first they arrived on the world in the Primary Dimension. *We should have nothing to do with these Humans,* was the second.

Into the Primary World they embarked: Sine to seek the truth of hidden things; Ap to seek an understanding of material, temporal, and cosmic systems; Tilotny to seek the lifeforms who dwelt there. The knowledge they gained was great, but it came at a price, for it was incomplete, and they were ever after changed, their innocence and joy replaced by a cold and bitter hollow.

Splendid Ap learned that this ancient realm, once called *Ereth* in the eldest days, was in the throes of decline due to millennia of mismanagement, war, and greed. It yet held invisible doors to other dimensions into which he might peer—some new, some long-forgotten and unopened for years, and some that had been sealed. The nations' leaders were attempting to pierce the veil, employing primitive scientific and occult techniques to widen the places where the barriers were thin, insensible to what might lie on the other side but certain it contained power. Curious as he too was of what might lay behind the hidden doors, he felt a certain revulsion for these people. Their lust for fortune and power overwhelmed their sense of reason, while their intellectual curiosity was dampened by arrogance and blind devotion to rigid dogma. Depressingly, it confirmed the mathematical probability that he was uniquely alien and utterly alone in this universe—save, perhaps, for his cognates.

For the time she walked amongst the Human race, Tilotny learned that there were some who craved dominion, some who longed to escape at any cost, and yet others who engaged in trivial distractions. Most simply craved treasure and pleasure. And all of them would do anything to extend their lives. Although they lay under a great beguilement that disguised their enslavement behind trite cultural norms, the masses would live their faded lives and never see through it. *How had this come to be?* she wondered. Only a very few perceived their world as it was—part of a larger cosmic conflict that had been going on around them for millennia—and from these wiser ones she learned crucial things as well.

Cold Danda Sine learned of entropy and the proclivities of Man for violence and of horror without bounds; that there were no depths to which Humans would not descend. And he saw that from ancient days to the present, occluded *intelligences* ruled the nations from the shadows. While they faced opposition by the forces of

light, the darkness seemed to have the upper hand. But the reason for this astounded him. Inexplicably, *appallingly*, the dark was what some preferred!

To see life ensnared in a wearying, never-ending cycle of growth, destruction, and rebirth was a grievous realization for him. "They are perpetually at war in this Primary World," Cold Danda Sine started, referring to what he saw as an innate reality beneath the concocted superficiality that made up the surface. "It is of great repulsion and fascination to me, but I cannot discern the ultimate cause beyond the ideological. Of the hidden powers, some are imprisoned, while some have managed to send their eidolons into realms fantastic and beyond… I would learn more if I could."

"We have learned all that we need," Tilotny declared. The ugliness of the world Humans shaped for themselves confirmed in Tilotny's mind that she'd been correct in her dim estimation of the Celestials. Contrarily, she had an urge to reach out to them and ask what had transpired here, but the longer she stood apart from the Celestials the more she felt alienated and embittered from all but her siblings. She would not humble herself to such ones. No, she must find her own way, and now she had a further thought as to how. "Is our *destiny* not clear? We were meant to save Skyriver, to prevent what happened here from happening there, to bring order out of the chaos."

"Of what chaos do you speak?" Sine retorted. "Skyriver knows only peace."

"For now," Tilotny returned. "This world also knew peace once. But the illusion has been stripped away. Look at what the Celestials have wrought, and how long they've allowed it to flourish. If it happened here, it will happen in every land upon which the Celestials hold sway."

Splendid Ap saw the logic in this but wondered, "There might be other variables we have not considered. Perhaps the Celestials have just cause for fighting amongst themselves. Perhaps those against which they strive are seen as… dangerous." The three looked at each other. As this train of thought led to uncomfortable ideas regarding their own origins, they shunted it aside, not wishing to consider the implications. But Ap privately wondered that if they *were* tainted, perhaps he could simply eradicate the blemish; but until he attempted this on himself, he would remain circumspect.

"What is your plan?" Sine asked.

Tilotny knew that she held no direct power over any of the races in Skyriver, but might she effect change through other means? There is much that they conceived and plotted during this period that was the start of their turn to darkness. "From the rare breed of sage Humans, I learned this: the Celestials have a fatal weakness; they are not *masters* of their charges, but merely *guides*. If they or the principles they hold aloft are rejected by any of their protected races, they will be forced to withdraw, for the Supreme Maker had long before issued a decree that they can not interfere with the free will of any."

"That is odd!" Sine affirmed. "What good is it to be Supreme Maker if one does not command those one made?"

"We will prove far better."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE FIRST EARTHWORLDS

Little is known of their intercourse at this time, for the offspring of Wutzek were more circumspect in their dealings, vigilant against the roving eyes of the Celestial hosts, light or dark. What is known is that after they prepared the Earthworlds they lured Humans to them by various means: power, adventure, wealth, flight, or longevity. Tilotny shaped the lures to their individual worldviews. Some believed they'd been chosen by an advanced alien race; some imagined it was their own ingenuity; others thought a messianic Maitreya had come for them; many sought to flee a world they thought nearing a seventh extinction event, and not a few were escaping some trying circumstance or breach of law. Those who considered themselves smart and superior proved the easiest to manipulate, as did the industrialists and profiteers who saw a financial windfall in space colonization. But for many, all they had to do was open the door.

THE MIND-MATRIX OF THE COSMIC CLOCK

Splendid Ap had fathomed that the Primary World and Skyriver were utterly dissimilar in time and yet oddly connected. So he had been pleased to note that the opening he'd made was stable enough to bring them right back to the time they'd departed their galactic ovoid. And yet he once again pondered whether he'd created irreparable harm to the temporal fabric. *Will events not unfold differently now that we have interfered? Or has a new domain once again come into being?* Surmising the latter, he felt bolder and more curious as to what interesting things he might effect and learn. And as he contemplated this, he "entered" into the weird and wondrous milieu of the In-Between World.

"Welcome, Splendid Ap! You have been busy! I am the Mind-Matrix and Keeper of the Cosmic Clock," said a resonant and disconcertingly familiar voice.

"Are you then… my offspring?" Ap asked as the cosmos swirled around him in ways that would have been stomach-churning for anyone else but was fascinating to him. He noted that the dozen strange guardians were no longer there.

"I am… *related* in a way. You have arrived here so that you may learn of events that you surmise might have already occurred, to see what role you played in them, and what you might yet learn by your secret creation of Apeiron." Constellations represented by beasts and geometric forms flashed by. Ap understood they held deeper significance, but was concerned more with the implications of the invisible entity's words.

"Not even my siblings can read my thoughts or see the hidden things I have brought about," said Ap. Confusion disturbed him. "*What does this mean*?"

"Does *this* one look familiar?" The being opened before him a window upon which Ap saw an image of the tiny mover whose life had been restored by him. "Her name is Leia Organa Solo. She is a bright and wondrous flame that cannot be put out… and an integral part of the good to come. She and her companions are the catalyst for the spread of Skyriver's *great tale* from which comes much wisdom and joy and, later, *restoration*."

"While it pleases me to hear this, how is it *you* know all this?" Ap wondered.

"Such is the nature of my creation that was shaped when first you sought to escape your maker."

"I have heard of this thing called madness. Perhaps that is what this is. Or perhaps I have irrevocably broken temporal laws and trapped us in a temporal loop."

"That is a perspective born of limited understanding," the Mind-Matrix stated. "Here is a better one: events that occur in time are immutable and infinite. Mechanisms are in place by which the integrity of Skyriver is preserved by the creation of another secondary realm. Though *some* will try, they cannot overcome time or dominate reality."

Ap thought on this. "Are those who fashioned this Cosmos the masters of reality and time?" The images of four different shapes appeared in the stars, morphing before him into winged faces. They then flew off and were followed by three more: a Griffin, Gargoyle, and Winged humanoid. But they too faded and disappeared.

"The custodians of this dominion serve a greater master, one who is supreme. Other realms have other custodians, but they are not all as noble or prudent; many of their realms were poorly fabricated and in haste; some are no longer governed at all—*and a few have entirely ceased to be!*"

Ap thought of his siblings. "Why does time differ in the different realms?"

"In the Primary World, time is as an unyielding master. In the sub-realms—which are thought to be imaginary otherworlds by the denizens of the primary and even secondary worlds—all touch the Dreamlands, and the Cosmic Clock works more as a… *storyteller*."

"So I *shall* have my own sub-realm, my own otherworld, for I wish to learn by trial and error."

"Of course," the Mind-Matrix replied, "for that is how you proceeded aforetime."

Splendid Ap paused as he considered that statement. "It seems a bizarre life I live."

"It will become more bizarre still!" Tilotny's sharp burst brought Splendid Ap out of his disquieting reverie, severing the connection to the Mind-Matrix. "It is time to expand our dominion."

He thought of revealing to his siblings what he'd learned, but none would understand what he'd come to ascertain, for he did not yet even fully understand it himself. Perhaps in time he would. But until such a time arrived, he knew he would feel utterly alone. That was an unpleasant emotion—and emotions were things he thought he'd eradicated. Perhaps it was not as simple as that.

There was still so much to learn. Accordingly, he would content himself with knowledge, exploration, and experimentation, for there were myriads of enterprises to oversee and many ventures to assay ere the coming of Apeiron, his future Infinity Realm.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE ARCHETYPE

The Earthworlds of the Architects—as they now referred to themselves—began with a tiny and wondrous *seed* harvested from the original and implanted in each, along with newly-birthed Elementals the Architects called Archetypes, to ensure the germination and perpetuation of life. Sagaciously reckoning that familiarity would prove beneficial to their guests, Tilotny and her siblings fashioned the Earthworlds to be akin to the original in terms of landmasses, oceans, fauna, and flora. A few were so well replicated in terms of constructs, technology, and material goods that many of the Humans wondered if they'd left their world at all, particularly as they looked out upon the stars, since to the naked eye the solar system looked the same. Not so to the inhabitants of the systems in which the Earthworlds appeared, for the arrival of a new planet in orbit, third from their sun, was a confounding and wondrous mystery.

The Architects were not content to merely replicate, for they deemed themselves artists. Some of the Earthworlds were given additional continents and a massive underworld populated with a host of creatures for their own odd amusements and that of the Humans who would discover such as they explored. For the time, the Humans busied themselves with the new power structure; some by reestablishing the cultural, political, religious, scientific, artistic, and linguistic artifacts of their former lands, the most enduring of which were their holidays since, for many, longing for the old world marked the architecture and style of the new. But not all. For many, innovative designs were developed in tandem with new technological and cultural developments. And some eschewed technology altogether, seeking to truly start anew. So began their long histories and conflicts, which is only touched upon here.

The Earthworlds encompassed Urthha, Terra, Cobol, and Sol, besides four more that were designed afterwards: Terra II, Cyrannis, Notron, and Corona V. Ravaath was unique in that it was a Sacred World first before becoming an Earthworld. Though none of the Architects would govern it, Ravaath served Tilotny as a trial for the others to ensure her plan would succeed in its initial run. Other Human worlds with similar names would come about, but they were not as the influential nine Earthworlds.

Uncertain of the psychological factors that would result of the move to an alien and far less populated landscape, even one resembling the old, the Architects endeavored to give each world unique advantages in the event that they miscalculated and one world failed to thrive. After only a few generations, most of the inhabitants of the Earthworlds didn't believe their forebears even came from a prior Earth.

Once they were ready, she would send them abroad to bridge the chasm from their worlds unto the worlds of Skyriver to do what they naturally did. In spreading their ways far and wide, the penumbra of death would find its way to the Cosmos, and in its despoliation, the galactic inhabitants would see that their Celestial masters were unworthy of them and, as soon as they did, Tilotny would step in as their galactic savior and reclaim the role that had been taken from her.

But in order for Urthha's inhabitants to depart for other shores, the ability to traverse the stars was required. The Gree had been unwilling to set up Hypergates on the Earthworlds, so the Architects paid a visit to the Kwoth, who were then living on Kwotar in the companion galaxy then known as Jinnorseel. The Kwoth graciously

welcomed these "Celestials from outside of Samûnaru" who they were told had come to provide further benefits to the galaxy. It was rare but not unheard of for Celestials to visit with the many races, and the Valdilar were numerous in these days.

After introducing herself as Onrai, a name she would employ for only some of the inhabitants of the galaxy, not wishing any to know they were being manipulated for their own good, she began congenially steering the conversation towards gate technology. "While the Gree are famous for their portals spread throughout the galaxy, it is my belief that Kwoth designs are far more wondrous and better adaptable to the needs of *our* people, some who do not even have gates yet."[13]

For the Kwoth, there was no reason not to further share their gifts. They felt in their hearts no particular competition with the Gree over their Hypergates nor any other gate-builders, though it pleased them to hear Onrai's praise. The Gree gates could not at this time cross galaxies, for which reason the Kwoth had developed and distributed their Infinity Gates, allowing those living in the dwarf galaxies to visit neighboring satellite galaxies and even Skyriver by means of hubs from which they could travel through the standard Hypergates.

Onrai not only requested gates for the Earthworlds but asked the Kwoth to construct large stellar Star Gates from which entire caravans might together travel. To the ears of the Kwoth, this sounded like a good idea, and with the assistance of Splendid Ap they fashioned, replicated, and distributed numerous Star Gates and terrestrial Star Temples. They would not realize until it was far too late how such portals might be misused, though, having only known peace, they had no reason to.

PANDEMONIUM

Tilotny turned to her siblings: "Now that it is done, it may be best that we depart these spheres so that the Celestials do not find and exile us before our plans have come to fruition, for it will take some time for the Humans to proliferate."

"I do not think the Celestials can so easily banish us," stated Splendid Ap, "but I agree it is best not to tempt fate. Through my gate, I have glanced at other dimensions that I wish to now explore, for that will aid me in the evolution of my own."

"Yes, I too weary from our labors!" Sine cried facetiously. "Let us take a holiday!"

So Splendid Ap whisked them away to a place then called Oneirichor; this was the fascinating Realm of Dream he had seen and wondered about.

After this excursion, he brought them to a peculiar universe that had drawn his attention some time earlier, having perceived anomalous wavelengths in a spatial-temporal spectrum that could only mean one thing.

"It is another Earthworld!" uttered Cold Danda Sine, gazing upon a replica of the very planet they had made several copies of.

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[13] Onrai means "honor," intending to reflect the esteem and reverence her forthcoming rule would bring, though it had an older connotation, meaning "without light." As the Celestials were Beings of Light, this seemed an appropriate moniker, for she sought to replace their light with her own.

"It is much more than that!" Splendid Ap intoned. "It is an entire universe disconnected from our own and yet… tenuously somehow… connected."

"Perhaps all of your tampering with time caused it," Tilotny remarked sardonically.

"I had no part in *this*," Ap stated, popping in and out of phase, "that I know of…"

"Is this the product of our lost brother?" Tilotny wondered.

"It does not seem to be his style," mused Sine.

"Let him be forgotten," chided Tilotny, mildly incensed at the reminder of him.

"There are numerous Human variants here," Sine pondered grimly. "That would not be unless—"

"—the administrators of this expanse also opened a portal for Humans," Ap concluded, "The Humans here believe they are on the original Earth…"

"So do many of ours…" Tilotny countered, but she was wondering if there was someone out there stealing her ideas.

"The people take pride in being rational," Sine jeered, "but they are quite *irrational*."

"In what ways?" Tilotny asked, drawing possibilities in her mind. Her form swirled as if a breeze blew upon her.

"They have only recently begun to travel the stars… and the majority of the extraterrestrials they meet are Human or Human-hybrids. Yet, they do not think to wonder why that is. Instead, they accept at face value the stories told by these so-called *aliens* who seek to elevate their importance by claims of antiquity."

Ap's eyes narrowed as he processed and confirmed the information Sine had provided. "They share the same faults: pride, ardent compliance to authority, postulating incessantly while interpreting incorrectly, conformity suppressing inquiry, building sprawling models that boast of logic while oblivious to foundational errors."

"Is this tiresome affair not a flaw of all their race?" Tilotny sighed. "Where are the Architects of this realm? I would query their purpose in fashioning this dimension."

Sine popped out, then popped back in. "I can find none. But the realm is connected to hidden mysteries from times past in the Primary World…" Sine grimaced as he peered deeper: "One must sift past the considerable collaborators and asserters of dominion to a single mind in which one finds the technological influence of emotions and motives… the enchantment of a great *bird* of some kind… seduced by a greater *delusion*… seeds of untruth embedded in futurist phantasies, sewn in a variegated garden over and again until the canker of transgenic plants has overtaken and assimilated the original, forgotten or disdained as ugly old things, remembered only because a few deadly petals occasionally push through… an invisible appropriation effected to reduce time and effort and more quickly harvest a gainful monoculture of dull and dreary simulacrum."

"And you say that *I* am incomprehensible!" Ap charged, but Sine only laughed.

"No artisans were these!" Tilotny rejoined. "But few are as brilliant as we…"

"A mélange of creativity and banality," Sine intoned, still deeply peering, "ignorance and theft, sabotage and conceit, the rotten fruit of the monstrous octopus."

"No doubt the governors of this realm would argue otherwise," Ap interjected, giving his siblings a sideways glance, which they ignored. "But it *is* odd governance, least of all over time, with nothing to ensure the stability of the temporal stream to preclude paradoxes. This has resulted in numerous alternate and parallel dimensions

that border alongside the first. It is as if time is wielded by forces capricious and mundane. I have never seen such pandemonium before. Whoever governed this realm was neither noble nor prudent."

"We will do better once we are rulers of our realm," Tilotny concluded.

THE CHARNEL WORLDS

Illathurion had been infiltrated! Long centuries had passed since the Architects had departed Illathurion on their journey of exploration. Upon their return, they espied nine accordant and abyssal worlds orbited by glowering red moons and burning black stars. And stirring in the midst of that abyss' churning pitch and roiling fires, upon the nine planes and in the thin, dark spaces beneath and between, enshrouded entities and their ancient lieges moved about.

"Splendid Ap, open for us a window by which we might more closely observe these penetrant planes," Tilotny commanded. Splendid Ap immediately obliged.

"Curious!" resounded Cold Danda Sine. "These are connected in some way to the *intelligences* that ruled with their agents and shadow-servants on the Prime World."

"Perhaps a hypogeal analogue," Ap stated. "We do not know for certain what these blasted worlds are, how they arrived here, or the nature of the multifarious beings that stalk it, save that they are of a similar sinister aspect. Violence suffuses them all. But they are not the *only* intruders. Elsewhere, a numinous bastille and its titanic prisoners have been placed in our domain. Curious, for it is not the only one."

Tilotny moved to send the abyssal worlds back to whence they'd come only to discover that she had no power to do so. Her attempts to blast them into oblivion also failed.

"These worlds cannot be exiled, for they are not *technically* within Illathurion, and, yet, they manifest here," Ap informed his dismayed sister, his own conoid form flashing purpureal in consternation. "Illathurion appears to be a kind of… *nexus* for this plane of outer darkness. I can see that they arrived with the creation of our Earthworlds to which I believe they are intrinsically connected. They must have known of us, for they remained invisible at that time, likely knowing we would not have brought the Humans here otherwise."

"Whomever reigns upon these *charnel worlds* are of at least equal power to us," Sine added, also trying and failing as well to remove or destroy them.

"We'll see about that!" Tilotny did not care for mysteries, let alone spirits and spheres that could not readily be banished or eliminated by their power. Though the Charnel Worlds took up but a small fraction of their realm, she knew they posed a threat.

"Laws prevent the crossing of dimensions, save by the Celestials," Ap remarked, explaining what he'd learned of Skyriver's realm distinction. "I cannot comprehend how they penetrated impenetrable partitions… unless that is what they are."

"Since those laws meant little to those who just obtruded into our realm," she asked pointedly, "does that mean they like *us*, then?"

"Difficult to discern. They resist such scrutiny."

"For the time, they remain within their obscure hollow," noted Cold Danda Sine, "and as we cannot yet banish or destroy them, I suggest we see into these other titanic beings who have been prisoned. Perhaps they can be made to serve our ends…"

"I will speak with them…" With that, Tilotny disappeared. By the time she returned, it was clear she was not happy. "Madness has taken their minds. Powerful servants of the Firstborn had they been, sub-creators of the cosmos seduced by a being of whom they would not speak but which clearly point to our new neighbors."

"We have been away too long," Sine stated. "Let us see what has become of our Earthworlds in the time we were absent, for I surmise that much has changed there."

URTHHA

Placed in the corresponding Aihai system in Wild Space, the first of the Architects' Earthworlds had been called Urthha, corrupted from a term repeatedly used in an early speech by a public servant to distinguish the "Earth That Is" from the "Earth That Was" (which sounded like "Urthha is, Urthha was"), though, as with all the Earthworlds, many simply called it Earth.

Tilotny had earlier given some of their leaders strength and some of their wise ones uncanny abilities so that they'd be better able to govern their provinces. These powers had been used to abet the changes in their milieu into one utterly different than before. Great kingdoms had risen and fallen alongside barbarism and sorcery, and its people were divided. Tilotny's sole concern was for Human survival and procreation, and for the most part they had: each passing century saw the population increase over ten-fold.

Yet from the charnel region had come powerful entities and chaos agents who demanded worship or menaced ruin, the worst of which were the Serpent People of Shuggon who had taken over the now sunken lands of Lemuria and Poseidonis. Even the Archetypes had been corrupted, no doubt the influence of the *charnel gods* upon them. And yet, one meek sorcerer had managed to kill no less than the White Worm, while several warriors and adventurers had done even more! Tilotny suspected the aid of the Celestials in some of the larger events, as Ap apprised her of the evidence of war and a host of weird deities that had been prisoned in the Xothic Zone or deep under Urthha. Still, she was glad the Humans had some gumption, even if their wars against each other annoyed her. Clearly, their propensity for violence had carried over from the old world to be perpetuated, justified, and expounded on in the new. And she was surprised to see how civilization reverted back to the ancient cultural, commercial, and governmental systems of the world they'd left behind. To help further them along at a more rapid clip, changes were needed.

Starting long before the Empyrean Wars and ending with the destruction of the gates around the galaxy in the War of Temporal Planes, that which is known as the First Breath was the initial period of galactic travel in which Mankind, utilizing gate technology, traveled, settled, and experienced numerous adventures across the stars. Much of this record of early Human history in Skyriver has been lost or forgotten. The earliest of these explorers first came to the planets and moons of their own solar system, for Tilotny had deliberately placed Urthha where they might encounter and befriend its peoples before going abroad to even further frontiers.

Even before the First Breath ended, prior to the Empyrean Wars, with the centuries having passed into millennia and the winds of the worlds turning to bitter frost, hostilities grew and spread. The Architects had known, of course, that this would

happen, but hadn't forseen the consequences. On Urthha, political conflicts led to concerns that the Star Gates posed a threat to world peace, with some stoking fears that "hostile aliens" would come through at any time. Thus, save for one, the gates were restricted and before long dismantled by the world's governments. With the passage of another generation, the Star Gate had become a thing of legend.

But Tilotny would not so easily be thwarted.

TERRA I

While Tilotny was dealing with issues on Urthha, Cold Danda Sine summoned Splendid Ap to show him the arrival of several black monoliths that had appeared upon Terra and within its solar system.

"Curious!" Splendid Ap bleated. "They are encoded, claiming to be from a Firstborn race who transcended the tyranny of matter."

"Skillful liars are our neighbors below," Cold Danda Sine remarked. "Why *now*?"

"Tilotny cleansed Urthha of their influence… *for the time*." Ap pointed to the Monoliths. "These have recently come from the rogue planet, Pnidleethon, which circles a rogue infernal star and its dark companion."

"The evil presence of these *eldritch powers* is ever skulking at the edge of consciousness, but they have not directly hindered or engaged with us."

"Apparently that has changed," returned Sine.

"These intelligences may not yet be as potent as they wish—for even in Skyriver there are powerful rubrics by which we are all bound—but that will not stop them from reaching beyond their own worlds in preparation for some unseen day in which they will stretch out from the Outer Darkness, seeking purchase in the realms beyond. Having failed on Urthha, it is against the other Earthworlds that they now move."

"It has already begun!" Sine stated with disgust as he mentally probed the monoliths, discovering that they had caused "mouths" from the different Charnel Worlds to open upon various places on Terra. "These doorways are ready to open."

"Metaphysical *borers*," Ap replied as he too peered deeper, frowning as he did so. "Already they have connected to the seed implanted in Terra and created several portals from which copious lifeforms have been transferred. They are likely awaiting the signal from their masters to attack."

"A different tactic, more subtle than on Urthha," Sine replied, intrigued and excited by the prospect. "What *kind* of lifeforms can you detect?"

"Numerous and numinous are the progeny of those who come forth from the infernal caldera; referred to as *old ones* and *demons* by the Earth peoples who believe them to be myths; judging by their functions and forms, it is not an inaccurate term."

"This contest should prove diverting!" Sine grinned, a mischievous expression burning on his gloaming face.

"No doubt," Ap remarked. "But the Monoliths are *more*. They are enhancers as well, though to what purpose I cannot ascertain; perhaps they seek to increase the strength and intelligence of their armies, but why not do so prior to sending them here?"

Sine furrowed his brow, recalling old lore from the Dawn World. "Ah! They intend to corrupt the Human genome with their mutant bastards, beasts, and behemoths."

"That is disconcerting," Ap remarked. "In this manner might they ensure the formation of a hale and hybrid host."

"And so rob us of our prize. How did learn of Urthha and of this world?"

Ap scanned the Terran minds. "Uncertain. Some Humans serve these powers."

"Of course they do!" Sine rolled his eyes. "Very well, let us dispense with these!"

"I would request from you a favor," Ap interjected. "Do not destroy the Monoliths."

"The fallen Celestials and their *pets* cannot be allowed to interfere with our plans."

"They will not," Ap explained. "I am curious to see the method and means by which they affect their subjects, albeit in an environment in which they are *contained*. It is my intent to annex them to a dimension of my own vagary. It will be shunted away from the galaxy, placed within a precise duplicate of your Terra, scrupulous to the last blade of grass. In this way shall we deceive the deceivers."

"Is not one dimension enough to play in?" Sine demurred.

"Never did I have sovereignty over Hyperion," Ap stated, "but Apeiron is mine, and perhaps in the agglomeration of dimensional purlieus in the grand omniverse, I might learn from the governance of but a pittance, for even within Skyriver we cannot access certain secret spheres."

"We all have our vices," said Cold Danda Sine. "So long as our sister's plot is undisturbed and *I* can play, I am content."

"Very well," Ap declared with a hint of pride.

Splendid Ap went forth to take the Monoliths. There was some resistance, but Ap had for more control and power than before. In the years to come, he would nurture the curious *handiwork* of the alien Monoliths. The containment sphere of his Apeiron dimension would hold many more of these experimental worlds and peoples, and he would observe, learn, and occasionally interfere with these worlds, upon which the laws of temporality were altered or suspended as he saw fit; but not all—Those he deemed productive were allowed to flourish and grow. And so Apeiron became the dimension later known as the Infinity Realm.

"It is time to inform our sister of these developments," Sine said before they transported themselves to Urthha.

Tilotny listened gravely to the news. "That these cryptic, rival powers had taken advantage of our absence is something we will have to deal with. Nor were they the only ones who visited our Earthworlds."

Earlier, Sargonnell of the Diathim had led some of his people to reconnoiter these new planets and had reported back the presence of Humans in the galaxy. The Celestials knew the import of this—and how the coming of Humans marked the beginning of the end of Skyriver's golden age. Once Mankind dispersed across the stars, there would be conflict. The Diathim continued to watch while attempting to discreetly espouse insight to those who might be receptive to their message, but only a minority came to embrace the wisdom of the Seraphic Beings of Light.

It is said that one of these who came to Urthha had gone rogue, having touched and been touched by the doleful-and-delirious essence of the Dreamlands. This pale and lovely maiden descended like a living flame from the boreal heights with strange tidings and visions of vast seas beyond what eyes can perceive. In the lands of Cerngoth and Commoriom, she was known as Ilyria, the White Sybil of Polarion, forewarning

doom that men did not want to hear and inspiring love that could not be fulfilled. Her kiss was like the bite of frost and her embrace, had any attempted it, was as the grip of the stirring corpse, bringing decay and demise. Yet she is remembered no more, save in the Prophecies of Lith and the Parchments of Pnom, and though other hands added to these over the centuries, chronicling the deeper lore, even they are now lost.

Tilotny summoned her now. Taken with her ineffable beauty, she put aside her jealousy to present her offer. "Hail, Ilyria! You and I have watched Mankind long enough to know that they have the potential for great good and a propensity for terrible destruction. Rule them on Terra I as queen. Use terror to keep them in check and love to keep them loyal. Sine will ensure none of the Old Ones overtake you."

"Why offer me this when you yourself can do this? And what do I get in return?"

"Protection from the Celestials who seek you out," Tilotny returned, "though you will have to disguise yourself as one of these Old Ones. As for me, I have other tasks that I must attend to that will see to it that we need never fear the Celestials again!"

As she shifted in reverie, pondering these things, Ilyria said: "There is more that I might tell you of these charnel gods and their armies…"

"I would know what it is they want in Skyriver," Tilotny replied.

"From ancient records no longer held by Man as true, it is known that those who scratch at the gates of the black chasm in which they were chained hate the Elder Gods. So too do they hate their offspring, the Elder Races of Skyriver. Though they go to great lengths to make it seem otherwise, the Eldritch Powers can only contort and remake the living, parody and degrade the dead, fashioning puppets dependent on their will. And as they tempt and terrify beings to their service, so do they feed on their essence. In these ways have they twisted creatures into beings substantively different from what they were before: aggressive, hungry, filled with loathing. But more than this, what they wish is to dominate. Into the host bodies of the ignorant, broken, and benighted they go to inhabit, procreate, and produce cambion offspring so that they might walk immortal in fitting vessels, ruling as god-kings over vast expanses, armies, and civilizations."

"We may not be able to exterminate the masters, but their armies and offspring are not so well protected," Sine beamed excitedly. "It is no great effort for me to send this hellbreed back to the barathrum from whence they arose—*in pieces if you wish it!*"

"No, brother," Tilotny replied after a moment. "Let the infernal host come. Ilyria will rob them of enemies and allies alike! Let the self-satisfied peoples of Terra be reminded that their power is great. They need only be tested."

Ilyria proved true to her word, but they would not leave success to the mad Diathim alone. The Architects now chose a few wise ones to serve as wizards and to whom they gave longevity, rods of power, and a receptacle to contain a tiny piece of the essence of Cold Danda Sine. Even as the infernal armies rose up in darkness, strength and cunning were infused into a line of warriors. When the enemy hordes burst upon their cities—believing they would easily subdue and crush their inhabitants—they were surprised to find them organized and ready for battle.

In what would later be called Terra's Primordium Age, great wars were fought. In time, the Humans resoundingly crushed the infernal armies. Strong as they were, they were intransigent beings indomitably obsessed with their own power and as often at

odds with one another as they were with their foes. Now as they fled back to their Hellworlds, they watched as their people were cruelly slain, their defeated spirits sent to the deep well. But their masters anticipated a future day of revenge and fashioned new fiendish variants that would hide in the underground, and so came a vampire race.

While the Humans of Terra celebrated, the seething Shadow Beings emerged from their umber hallows and glided furtively over to Cold Danda Sine: "Heed our warning! The Humansss and all Earthworldsss belong to our Masssterssss, for they are under *their dominion*. You would do well not to hinder usss…"

To reward those few Humans that pleased him, Cold Danda Sine extended their lives and brought them to a pleasant world in Illathurion called Cytharion of the Seven Suns. In this he followed Tilotny's lead, placing her favorites on Teloe, not far from Shumath-Ghun. But to Ap she said to punish those she hated. And to Appith of the Seven Black Suns, a world governed by robots, they went.

Cold Danda Sine laughed. If he could not destroy them, he could have his fun, which he did as he wrenched them into a variety of ungainly shapes. Eventually, he released them. Sneering and hissing, they withdrew and did not return for a time.

But in the passage of long years, Cold Danda Sine proved less and less interested in Terra and its rulers who proudly strutted about, mismanaging affairs. Even Ilyria. With growing circumspection and ennui, he pondered grimly over them: *Not having any enemies, they seek to make enemies of one another. Violence and greed come so easy to them. How dreary, loutish, and despicable! They are not so different from the creatures they once drove off this world. How had their Maker ever tolerated them?*

When the Cobollians arrived, he left the world to their keeping. Eventually, the dark powers killed Ilyria and sent her body to the deep well to prevent her return, and there she would await her revenge.

COBOL

Pristine and beautiful without measure, Cobol was regarded as a paradise Earth to its inhabitants and shielded from outside detection within the Magnetic Sea. Here were transplanted those considered as the upper echelons of society, experts in the fields of medicine, law, business, and science, and their topmost had formed a Quorum of twelve ladies and lords who governed the twelve nations they formed.

As Tilotny had chosen to govern Urthha with selective, punctuated aid, and Terra had been left to Cold Danda Sine's whims, Splendid Ap chose to rapidly accelerate the development of Cobollian society, for they were meant to be the first to spread out across the stars. To achieve this end, he introduced technological advancements along with augmentation drugs to strengthen their bodies and minds.

As progress was given full reign, society innovated far and fast, with but few of the Quorum members keeping progress in check and environmental harmony reserved for the Edenic hills of Cobol's capital, where most of their palatial homes were to be found. In the course of several generations, degradation and overpopulation began to take its toll on Cobol, which led to a massive outcry from the people. In response, the supercilious rulers decried them as troublemakers and insurgents and had any they could make an example of incarcerated.

At a loss for what to do with these recalcitrant peoples, Splendid Ap summoned Tilotny. She studied them for a time. Of the twelve current rulers, some had fallen to the haughtiness of wealth and power; some were exceeding their intake of augmentation drugs or mixing them with illicit substances; but many were simply craven, leaving only a few who could be counted as noble and compassionate.

From Ilyria, she had gleaned an idea that she now employed. Appearing as one of twelve ancient gods long ago worshiped on the dawn world—for this pantheon had come back in vogue on Cobol— Tilotny appeared in private before each member of the Quorum. She took to her roles well, embodying the statuesque beauty and arrogant personalities of these ancient Diathim who'd long ago sought worship, knowing her performance would suitably awe the Quorum. For the most part, she was right, but she had not counted on the events that followed.

Tilotny encouraged each to spread out into the stars, intimating that their world could not be saved and that the time had come to employ their gates to reach new worlds. One of the Quorum's most respected members, Madame Xiang, confirmed the divine revelation she'd received with several scientists who declared that within a century Cobol would lose its ability to sustain habitation. So, without hesitation she saw to it that measures were put in place.

But after the first team departed for Arkadia, without warning, the interstellar gates were mysteriously destroyed. Shocked and furious, the Cobollians went to great lengths to find and round up those responsible. Tilotny peered deeper into this cabal, perceiving behind their actions an impression of some rancid will, but it vanished before she could seize upon the source. She knew that amongst the populace were those who believed they dwelt upon an accursed sphere, and in their sacred scrolls it was written that a people who despoiled their world, be it through copious bloodshed or pollution, were a doomed people. More curious to her were the passages that spoke of an ancient and abhorrent presence that dwelt below Cobol. While she could locate no entity that matched this description, she knew what it all meant: one of *them* had come to interfere here as well!

In the meantime, scientists reported that several potentially inhabitable worlds within the system could easily be reached, and with their newly developed gravitic-manipulation and terraforming technology a present reality, the Quorum gave the go-ahead. Madame Xiang protested, reminding the Quorum that they had agreed to leave the system entirely. She understood that without the gates, this was going to be harder to accomplish, but with vast resources at the Quorum's disposal, it was possible and she encouraged their scientists to keep working on solutions.

The earliest terraforming efforts proved unsuccessful, causing riots to break out that led to the deaths of three of the Quorum's lords, but a decade hence, Madame Xiang felt confident enough in their progress to announce that the salvation of their people was at hand: as part of the Global Exodus Alliance, aboard massive, newly-constructed, diamond-shaped Ark ships, migration to a new paradise world would shortly begin.

Aten was the ninth member of the Quorum, which had been renamed the Ennead. A fanatical devotee of the stars and sun, he persistently called out to his goddess as the GEA project neared completion.

"You have done well," Tilotny said, appearing before him in a lionine form.

With bowed head and on bent knees, Aten beseeched her, "Your guidance we need, O great one."

"Your exile draws near. Once the Arks are prepared, direct your people to the Cyrannis system. There, we have prepared for you a number of habitable worlds orbiting around four suns."

Raising his eyes, he ventured, "Our sacred scrolls tell of our brethren dwelling upon an older world… I believe it is called *Earth*."

"The worlds I send you to will be as *new* Earths," the goddess replied. "However, there is one… It is inhabited by a people less advanced than yours."

"Such a land would benefit from the wisdom *you* bring!"

Tilotny smiled at his sincere adulation. As she saw no harm in consenting to his wishes and perhaps advancing Urthha further along, she conceded. "Very well. You and yours may go. Follow these coordinates to a rift I have opened for you. It will lead you there." A star map appeared in the air before him, which he copied ere it vanished.

Aten made his vision known to the other rulers of the Ennead, who shared it with their personal staff, retainers, and associates who made up the elites of Cobol, but he kept the star chart embedded in his medallion, which was the symbol of his power in the Quorum. But this sparked jealousy amongst the other members of the Ennead who murmured that Aten would wield dominion over a wealthy and established world while they would be forced to spend years laboring over an undeveloped rock (the fact that they would remain in the comfort of their ships while the working classes did the laboring was never mentioned in their discourse), and it was agreed upon by six of the nine that they would steal the star map he'd obtained.

The theft did not go as planned, and Aten was killed. His death was a small matter to the conspirators, as they could easily blame it on insurgents, but it hung as a pall upon them. As to their new plans, since the two who had not conspired were yet intent on the original passage, these would shepherd the citizens of the twelve nations to the Cyrannis system, while they who comprised the other six would "honor Aten's wishes" to go to Urthha. But as the two suspected what had happened, the rest agreed that they would leave behind a star chart to the rift that led to Urthha. This served a safeguard for their people in the unlikely event that things went awry. As soon as the coordinates were copied, the Ennead returned it to the medallion, which was then buried with Aten along with their secret.

As for the large body of political prisoners, Madame Xiang received another vision in which she was told to lead the pardoned dissenters, rebels, and criminals on a different course to the White Sun system. On this course, everyone agreed.

A little over fifty years after the Global Exodus Alliance was first announced, in the midst of privation, pollution, crime, and martial law, the Ark ships embarked on the journey to their new homes.

Timekeeping on Cobol had carried over from both a standard calendar from the Old Earth as well as an antiquated religious almanac based on calculations dating to one of the earliest civilizations. As they now left for their new worlds, the calendar was reformed to start anew the reckoning of time from this point forward, calling it "NE" for New Earthworlds. Due to the great influence the Cobollians would come to have on the Human population, this revised calendar spread to become the dominant

calendric systems on Urthha, Terra, and Corona V, gradually replacing the dates and times from the old world. It would not be perfect, and dates would not always line-up due to confusion and other factors in the early years of its adoption.[14]

The six Lords of Cobol, with their administrations, extended families, and friends, made up what came to be considered a Thirteenth Colony. A year had passed after the others departed, and they yet lingered on Cobol. Some even considering staying now that the planet was free of the majority of its people. But as one family member after another began to fall ill, they took no further chances and followed the coordinates to Urthha. So would Cobol lay fallow for near upon a millennium.

SOL

Known to its inhabitants as Earth or Terra, the fourth world of the Architects was designated for their absent brother, Horliss-Horliss. As he had left them and not returned, so too would they abandon the people of this Earthworld. Whether civilization thrived or burned, it was emblematically left in the hands of their recreant sibling.

Located at the edge of the galactic rim and near to the satellite galaxy of Massula, the Human population on Sol would progress on their own without the assistance of the Architects. As they never received a gate, society advanced much as it had on the old world before the advent of technology. With the slow development of Mankind's culture and technological state and the perceived lack of a protecting Architect, a host of dark forces out of the Charnel Worlds were sent to the neighboring moon and planets of that Human world, imagining that the Humans of Sol would prove easy pickings. And the Enemy had gone to great measures to inflame them against the Humans, so that they were eager to cross space to exterminate the perceived usurpers.

But Horliss-Horliss *was* aware of the world that his siblings had left in sardonic honor of him, and in his own surreptitious way, he provided direction and aid against the many deadly forces that seeded or surrounded it.

RAVAATH

"*They* are here," Marutz stated quietly. "In bringing the Humans to our realm, the the Architects have inadvertently opened a window to *their* demimonde." The Celestials had known aforetime of those unsleeping eyes watching and waiting for the opportunity to infiltrate. Although the collective Enemy had ages ago been chained and collared, their spirits scratched at the thinning walls and peered dimly through opaque windows. Some could even travel through the unlighted chambers past the doors of night when breaches were made from the outside. In the Dawn World, upon which they'd staked a claim, their accomplices and lesser officers preyed on the weak and wounded, isolating and alienating them, for their trauma and

[14] Of the Earthworlds, Sol maintained its own historical and chronological framework which, due to its insular nature and multiple cataclysms, was extreme in its errors.

suffering was as ambrosia for them, while others bent their will on turning innocent hearts rancid so that they too proliferated the spreading dark.

For the *masters*, however, the targets were the powerful in society, those who'd already cast off moral creeds for what they desired, indifferent to the cost. Such were as empty houses ready for dwelling. Yet, the greatest prizes were the few who willingly offered themselves. Whereas entities cannot long contain their awful essence before their host vessels burn out, in these they could truly *integrate*, their black spirits remaining lodged for far longer, even after the vessel had withered away.

The Celestials did not use the names of the Enemy, which they referred to by various epithets: Bogan, the Ancient Ones, Lords of Darkness, Outer Gods, Necromantic Ones, Eldritch Powers, Eternal Ones, Phantom Lords, Timeless Ones, Iyrin, and later, the Immortal Gods of the Sith. So as to distinguish the head of that pantheon from the others, they referred to the Dark One as the *Father of Shadows*. Some cults that emerged in the Cosmic Wars depicted his blasphemous idol as that of a winged, lion-headed, serpent-entwined key-bearer called Aion or Ong, though the people of Ravaath called the ancient oppressor Mortuus and Vatuu, and other peoples had other names.

Ravaath also knew its benefactors, referring to the Celestials in terms of the elements: Lluxos as Solum (earth), represented by a boar; Xurz as Exuro (fire), represented by a dragon; Marutz as Maritimus (water), represented by a turtle; and Wutzek as Aeris (air), represented by an eagle. Collectively, they were called the Affinity Gods, though they accepted no worship.

For Marutz, it was a uniquely disquieting moment, for she had made up her mind as to what needed to be done and now revealed her decision. "I will personally engage with this Ancient Nemesis." She could feel her companions' apprehension before she even spoke it. Forthwith, many words were spoken at once.

"That would be *most* unwise," Xurz stated.

"They are yet kin and of more or less similar strength," one of the Valdilar added.

"Kin they are no longer, but it is true that the most we can hope is to seal them again," Wutzek asserted. Other Celestials voiced similar concerns and opinions.

"Nevertheless," she started, "it must be done. I will see to it that he remains confined until the time of the Restoration when the last of the Chosen Ones appears."

"There are many powers of darkness," Xurz reminded her. "We have already dealt a blow to many of the Old Ones. Are you certain it is one of the *Ancient* Ones?"

"The imprisoned Titans claim to serve one called Invictus, but it is unlikely they were corrupted by a lesser agent. And before we took his mind, Sathla confirmed that he shared the knowledge of our stolen tablets with Aion his wicked twin. The Diathim have reported that the Shadow Kings departed their estates; Negs and other servants have been set loose from the Dark Planet; the Serpent People have had empires rise and fall; a Dark Master has gone to Sol; three others have been reported in Aihai system, likely due to its proximity to Urthha; and a Dark Lord has been identified on both Terra and Cobol. Wherever Mankind goes, *their* profane spirits follow. Ravaath is sacred, and for that reason alone must I move on the Lord of Darkness—while he is not yet at full strength and before he acquires willing vessels in which to wield force upon this plane, for that is what his kind seek. I have thought long upon this…"

"Then, let us join you," Elegast declared. He was the first of three Valdilar that had joined the Osiarch in the shaping of Samûnaru. Eipha and Niphal were also present. "Together, we will seal the entity."

"No," she stated. "If for some reason we are defeated, it will result in all of us being confined and our capacities greatly diminished. I must do this alone."

"You have not thought long enough, Marutz," Wutzek contended. Humans were not supposed to have come to the Sacred Worlds, nor to any world in Skyriver, and because it was his offspring that had done this, he felt guilt-ridden and sick at heart. "Ravaath is the Sacred World from which we first entered the Ocean of the Osiarch, and yet we see it defiled: the nation of Imperia builds a mighty empire, conquering both the Southern Expanse and the Windward Steppes, and now it turns its attention to Nordagh, the only rival able to oppose them. No wonder the Eldritch Power is released; the Enemy will keep returning, for the Humans continually wage war!"

"It is for this very reason that the Valdilar have done as I've asked and raised up a noble warrior, a Valkyrie from Nordagh," she replied, "for the accursed must make expiation, and so I must remain to keep watch over the land. Humans were not meant for our shores, but I wonder if, in fact, there is some deeper plan involved in this, some inevitability we had not realized or been informed of."

"I agree," Elegast assented. "For good or ill, the Humans are here. We cannot wish it otherwise, nor is it the Maker's will to confine or exile them. We knew from the start that the Shadow would gain a foothold unto this realm. If you fail to seal this one on Ravaath, the Enemy will come for Andowyne, Angorathea, and Isorropía."

"Can we not lure the Nameless One to an uninhabited world?" Eipha asked.

Marutz had already considered this: "The Lords of Darkness are not easily lured. The barrier between our realm and the material one is most permeable on Ravaath; our arrival will open barriers at the poles where none dwell and the walls are thinnest. In such a place, I will have the greater advantage."

"You may be able to ensnare him in the Harmonic Convergence," Niphal intoned. She referred to the time when the planets of the system lined up as they did at the start, when the Celestials first manifested in Samûnaru, strengthening the mesh of cosmic energy that flowed from the Force.

"But what of the Humans?" Eipha furrowed his brow in consternation. "No doubt many will perish in this conflict."

"They are already in conflict," Marutz replied, "and are long familiar with Mortuus, even when he was little more than a whispered legend. Wutzek speaks true. Not even the honorable ancient guardians of that realm can protect them from themselves. For the greater good, I shall help them find peace again once the Dark One is vanquished."

Elegast also pondered a larger design, but it was hard not to lay blame at the feet of the Architects. Tilotny had first tested the Celestials by placing some of the Humans on Ravaath to see what their response might be. What the Celestials had done was respect the cosmic Law of the Wayfarer that states that anyone, upon entering a portal to an *otherworld*, save for that of the Unseen Realm, would not be barred. So, to help maintain peace between the Humans and the natives of Ravaath, they employed the Shi-Ao progenitors of the Gampassa and Zaratan to serve as avatars of balance. After this, the Architects went on to populate their Earthworlds,

intending them to be the means by which they might gain ascendency. This began a chain reaction. The first casualty were the Guardians of Samarra, who resented the Human race even more than Wutzek had, and became the Malevoiy. "Even if you succeed," Elegast noted, "that vile spirit will be confined only until the next Convergence, at which time he will be free, and you will have to battle him again."

"Further action must be taken," declared Wutzek. "His very presence, even prisoned, puts Ravaath—not just its Humans but the beasts and Elementals—in danger."

"I will fashion for them a spirit world akin to the Circle of the Spirit wherein they will be contained and safe for a time." This announcement was made by Lady Braghlei, Shamaness of the Whills, speaking for the first time. A few claimed that it was from her and Amon Lith that Lluxos conceived the idea of Skyriver, while some said that there were elder ones besides these from which Samûnaru was imagined. "Provided the contagion of darkness does not overwhelm Ravaath, the spirits can aid in preserving the sacred qualities of this world and perhaps even benefit the Humans."

Wutzek harrumphed. He respected the Priestess, ancient and wise as she was, but that did not mean he always agreed with her. "We are skirting around the main issue: if Marutz does *not* succeed, she will be trapped, and the world will fall."

"That is no great obstacle," Eipha interjected. "We have powers that could easily alter matters so as to release Marutz."

"No," Marutz stressed. "We are bound by cosmic laws. Should we break those laws, even to defeat the Enemy, then they are no longer laws, and we threaten the very rubrics upon which we have built this dimension. *If* I fail," she added, "create a barrier around Ravaath to hinder all contact with Skyriver."

"If you fail, there will be one less of us to govern," reminded Xurz.

"As it is, with the coming of the Dark Ones, we are too few," Wutzek opined.

"Bring forth the Endless Speakers," Niphal suggested.

"I see no wisdom in that," the Shamaness stated after a moment. Everyone understood her disinclination to involve the Great Ones of Oneirichor, but Niphal insisted that they were the best choice under the circumstances.

"We would do better to rouse the Elder King and Exalted of the West," Xurz countered, "or even the Celestials of Imaginum…"

"Other Powers are governing their own domains," Marutz elucidated, "and coping with the calamities inherent to them, for the Sleeping Chaos has extended its tendrils into nearly all realms. As to the Great Ones of Y'harneth-Lahai, whom you call the Endless Speakers, they have both a vested stake in our seas, having created offspring here, and the gift of *severance*, which allows them to govern more than one realm."

"Of their *own* accord did they come," Eipha scoffed. "No invitation had we proffered."

The spheres of Wutzek stirred restlessly. "Nor was any needed. Their behavior on the Plane of Dreaming may be *unorthodox*, but that does not qualify them for exclusion."

"They were made for *that* realm," the Shamaness said, "their gifts for *that* realm."

"You see danger in their coming?" Xurz asked.

"No… I see fractures of fractures, like a mirror broken twice… and considerable passion from which light and darkness emerge."

"But no malice," Marutz reasoned. "This universe we fashioned is vast beyond comprehension. We *need* aid, even temporarily, in the event that things go awry."

"In everything, there is risk," Wutzek said softly.

Throughout this conversation, Lluxos had not spoken a word. Nor did he betray his emotions. Now when they turned to him for his counsel, it was like the burst of a dam. "I forbid this rash act!" His gaze bore into Marutz.

"I do not require *your* permission." With her own unremitting gaze, she stared back until he looked away. What she saw there was fear and doubt.

"What is it you have seen, Lluxos?" asked Lady Braghlei, her eyes narrowed in consternation as she tried to pick up the anagogic threads of his orphic vision that had caused such an uncharacteristic outburst.

Lluxos was silent for a moment before speaking. "Only that she is cut off from us… from me. I cannot see before or beyond that."

"Nor the reasons for it," the Shamaness reprimanded, "which may be anything."

"We have discussed this before," Marutz said gently. "In your desire to protect us, and everyone, you would single-handedly take on every obstacle yourself. That is not who we are. If you value what we created, you will let me do what I must."

"Then do so with this understanding," Lluxos returned. "The conflicts of this world are but the symptoms of the greater ill. With the rise of the Eldritch Powers, those Humans who incline towards darkness will willingly reject their former autonomy and all the good they had learned; they will lead others to bow before the Lords of Darkness whose armies will cover the lands in an engulfing wave. They will not be reasoned with or made to see the error of their ways but will pervert law and call it justice; confound wisdom with wickedness; commit great evil and name it good."

After a time, Marutz sighed. "I *know*. And so *we* must ever be a beacon of light for those in the roaring seas, a candle of life for those encircled by darkness, a warming fire for those who will not succumb to the engulfing night."

"We left the old world so that we would not have to contend with death and destruction… it appears that we cannot escape this fate. It was said that they would taint many things before the end, even that which we strived so long to build."

"We had many good years," Marutz said in remembrance, "more than most."

"And yet it never seems to be enough…" Lluxos then turned away and vanished.

"Such is the way of Lluxos," she said. "Ever has he sought the ideal in all things."

"As do we all," said Wutzek ruefully. "We were not crafted for imperfection."

"To do what is right does not require perfection," she clarified, "only resolve."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE SECOND EARTHWORLDS

During the long journey to Urthha, the Ark ships of the Thirteenth Colony came under attack by a mysterious vessel in the form of an asteroid that shadowed them. Tilotny flicked away the adversary but was again unable to destroy it or penetrate its guise. So she gave to the Lords of Cobol a vision in which they were told to divide. The first group should proceed through the rift to Urthha as intended. The second group should follow a new course that she provided to Terra II, a world akin to Urthha and inhabited by Humans. And to both groups she warned that they were to avoid bringing about the conditions that caused them to flee Cobol.

Before going their separate ways, it was decided that one Ark should rejoin the twelve tribes heading to the Cyrannis system; this was done to ensure that the heir of their eldest chieftain was kept safe. It would never arrive. Pursued by a sinister force, the Ark was forced to land on the nearest habitable world, Trammis III, a seemingly uninhabited paradise heralded by those who visited it as a land before time. Built for such a contingency, the Ark placed the royal heir and his consort in cryochambers until it was deemed safe enough to release them; in the event that their own people didn't come, instructions were left for a sufficiently advanced people to open the chambers.

The Firstborn race that ruled over Trammis III and many other spheres had been keeping an eye on the Earthworlds, and now looked upon the Ark with anxiety. They would not touch it nor allow their Pherox and Xinli offspring to touch it. The arrival of Humans on Trammis III could mean only one thing: the Shadow had come.

TERRA II

It took nearly a hundred years for the Ark ships carrying Cobol's pardoned prisoners to arrive and another twenty to terraform the now-habitable worlds of the White Sun system (in what is now known as the Fath sector), the capitals of which were made to resemble their former world of Cobol. Together these and other terraformed worlds would become part of the Central Planets of Terra and ruled by those who came to dwell on Londinium (later Terra II) and Sihnon (later known as Sion).[15]

Meanwhile, the faction of the Lords of Cobol who'd been sent to Urthha arrived there only to find disappointment. By this time, the children and grandchildren of the Thirteenth Colony called themselves the Alliance. But to the rulers of the nation upon which they'd alighted, they put forth an elaborate and partly fabricated story of

[15] The latter is known today as Earth in the Fath system, even as its history is forgotten. Sion is no more, destroyed by Darth Nihilus and the Sith Lord who'd been born there and took its name, Darth Sion.

their ancient origins. This was done in the belief passed down from their forebears that they were a superior people naturally entitled to rule. Initially welcomed as lost brothers and sisters of Mankind, they were tucked away from the public by hospitable officials covertly looking to obtain advanced technology and weapons from them. They complied at first, believing that a demonstration of their preeminence was an appropriate means of establishing themselves as their rightful lords. But ere long, they began to suspect that the Urthhans weren't assessing their competence for office but seeking military advantage over other world powers. Having come to rule, not be ruled or used as pawns in games of war, the heirs of the Lords of Cobol escaped.

The nearest system for which they had coordinates was the one in the White Sun system, a less-than-ideal scenario, but one they'd have to make the best of. Fortunately for them, the current monarchs of Terra II were beset by all manner of problems and not faring well. The arrival of the Ark ships was a welcome one, boding innovative equipment and skilled personnel. In exchange for this, the Alliance requested positions of authority, which the failing government of Terra II provided. Wise to the optics of the situation, the heirs of the Cobol Lords now restructured the government and their people, now called Alliance Terrans, abbreviated to Alterrans.

After getting the local affairs in order, the Alterran leaders sent out roboterraformers to colonize nearby worlds, the earliest of which were named in honor of the ancient gods they'd served on Cobol, with later ones named by the whims of the entrepreneurs, explorers, and adventurers that continued to push further out to planets such as Agora, Desideratum, and Epiphany.

Near upon three centuries hence, conflicts arose over accusations by the border worlds of resource hoarding on the part of the Central Planets. Impassioned debate devolved into heated arguments and stalemate. Then things turned ugly.

In a misguided, draconian attempt to pacify protestors, the Universal Alliance funded a chemical experiment by Elai-Elium Enterprises (EEE), the science division of a much larger corporate body. On an isolated colony in the Blue Sun system, they put G23PH in the air processors. What resulted was a kind of walking catatonia that led to the death of most of the population, but not all; for one tenth of one percent, their damaged minds and mutating bodies became the ideal receptacle for those malevolent intelligences of the mysterious infernal caldera to come and nest. As a horde of ravening ghouls, they killed the observing scientists and then took to the stars as reavers in ships adorned with the corpses of their victims.

Not wishing to acknowledge their role in the affair, the Universal Alliance covered it up and ignored the problem for years until the creatures made their way to the Central Worlds. Much destruction had they wreaked ere they were put down.

Despite the evidence presented of their culpability, no charges were brought against the government, EEE, or its parent corporation, who blamed it on the mistakes of a few bad shuura. But this was the final straw for the aggrieved worlds, which seceded en masse to form their own Coalition of Independent Planets.

The Alliance would not permit the union to fracture, and war was declared against the independent planets. The latter could not match the superior forces and

arms of the wealthier Central Planets, which ultimately forced the independent leaders to sign an armistice. From this arose a new governing body called the Universal Alliance which was supposed to more equitably serve all worlds. That the new parliament governed just as partially as the old—connected as they were with the wealthy trade guilds on Sion—came as no surprise to many.

To the public's dismay, EEE and other biotech industries continued advancing their genetic manipulation drugs in an attempt to provide the government with supersoldiers, holding to the notion that even greater augmentation would produce better Humans (from this, the Neosapiens would later come to be).[16]

Taking advantage of the angry public sentiment, Novina, Gexin, and other competing corporations conspired to expose, scapegoat, and eliminate EEE, their biggest competitor. Impotent in their fight to restore their public favor and corporate funding, EEE departed Terra II to create problems on other shores.[17]

CORONA V

While some saw it as necessary to rebel against the government's tyranny, there were those who felt it was wiser to flee and start anew. During Terra II's Universal Alliance War, refugees and idealists who'd had enough of conflict went off to establish a new and kinder world. They were led to the pristine planet of Corona V, and in the long millennia ahead it would become the capital of a new Terran dynasty.

Corona V was akin to Cobol and the world before it. And the few who'd read of the ancient histories of man were surprised by the similarities to these lost worlds. For long years, the people kept busy and had relative peace, progressing at their own pace without the direct aid or interference of aliens or cosmic beings until after the War of Temporal Planes, when severe trials and tribulations followed.

As the Architects had a hand in its founding, Corona V would be regarded as the ninth and last of the Earthworlds, though through much of its long history, Corona V would be called Terra and Earth and would maintain this designation until its destruction millennia later.

NOTRON

Following the departure of the Thirteenth Colony of Cobol from Urthha, several competing governments began to engage in espionage in order to steal the technological secrets the Cobollians had provided, which they believed should have gone to

[16] Hidden as it was in the Crinos Nebula of what came to be known as the Forbidden Zone, Terra XI (later Galterra) was used for similar experiments until a plague outbreak resulted. A similar cover-up followed, with its survivors abandoned to scavengers and the post-corporate Overdog biosecurity division which had also been left behind.

[17] Prior to their acrimonious split, EEE deployed gateships equipped with stolen Gree technology to explore the satellite galaxies under a joint venture with the Alterra Corporation, reaching as far as Aelios where they fixated on the planet they labelled 4546B.

them. These actions invariably led to an arms race and the world war that followed. Forced to intervene to prevent their annihilation, Tilotny had cause to wonder if they were worth all the trouble!

Several movements arose dedicated to uniting Urthha under the leadership of a single authority. The one individual poised to succeed was Chancellor Albion Zhell, a charismatic and autocratic general who spoke of bringing the other twelve world superpowers together with his under one umbrella. Unbeknownst to all but his closest cabinet members, Zhell was a xenophobe whose yoking of the nations was but a ploy to eliminate his rivals and create a single superpower under *him*. Years earlier, he'd seeded loyal members in key positions while quietly eliminating opponents, and it was starting to become known that it was these very ones who incited the nations to war under his orders, and though none could as yet prove it, it was only a matter of time.

The rediscovery of the ancient alien Star Chamber and Infinity Gate within his borders would alter the course of galactic history forever. Kept hidden from the public, scientists working on the gate revealed to Zhell that the portal could send travelers across the galaxy to a pristine world of unlimited resources inhabited only by a small pacifist population called the Taung, and they took up but a mere fraction of the land. Chancellor Zhell considered his options. He could continue to jockey for power amidst a growing scandal and the ruthless political rivals ready to seize upon it, or he could reign as undisputed sovereign upon a new world.

Knowing that scientists, military leaders, a support staff, and a large working class would be required for a successful occupation, Zhell informed his loyal supporters of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Many were excited at the prospect, but as word spread and other nations began to hear rumors that a gateway had been found that could lead to another world, the administration dismissed it as a hoax. That convinced some, but not all, for the Urthhans had used the gate in the distant past to travel to worlds in their solar system, and stories of those adventures were still being told, even if they were dismissed as fiction. The authorities then changed tack and claimed the discovery was a mere ruin that had precipitously and irresponsibly been claimed to be an alien artifact. When questions lingered, patsies were produced and derided. After all, Zhell did not want *everyone* on his new world.

Tilotny had intended the gates to be perceived as a great boon to the Urthhans, but she tolerated Zhell's whim for a time, as those relocating to Notron eventually came to number in the tens of thousands. To her irritation, however, once Zhell determined that enough people had come to the new world, he instructed his successor on Urthha—all too happy for the exalted position—to have the gate destroyed. The dwindled population and the disappearance of the administration would be attributed to a faked disaster at an exploded power plant and blamed on a number of factors, from foreign terrorists to virulent strains of some new pathogen. Tilotny intervened to ensure the gate's survival, though the events that followed saw to it that it would remain hidden for millennia due to the collapse of Urthha's economy and political structure, which reverted to a semblance of what it had been at one period in the old world, and once again she found herself puzzled by this odd pattern.

As with the Ravaath and Solar System experiments, as Splendid Ap called them, Tilotny had taken a calculated risk by re-encoding the gate to send the Humans to Notron, for if the Taung petitioned the Celestials, they would likely exile the transplants back to Urthha. But she had watched the Taung for a long time and surmised that this would not be the course they took. Also, the Celestials still seemed reluctant to interfere with Humans, even when they caused problems.

Those who crossed over with Zhell found a stunning and picturesque green paradise with several large continents only sparsely populated by the native Taung, a proud and noble race of aliens. Their earliest interactions were pleasant enough that Zhell allowed researchers to stay and learn what they might from the aboriginals. For their part, the Taung were welcoming of these mysterious new people and eager to learn more about them. As Emperor Zhell did not want the Taung speaking their language, this forced the linguists to instead teach them one of the older tongues that they were fluent in, and the Taung were quick to learn it. So, Notron Cant came to be.

The Taung explained to the Humans that in their native tongue their world was called *Notroskînon*, which meant "Beautiful Land," but as they moved into a discussion of political matters, the Taung revealed that they were an egalitarian people who served no leader or throne. One of the linguists, outraged at the notion of what he considered an anarchist state, sneered that they should instead call their world *Notron*, which meant throneless; and amongst the Humans, that is the name that stuck.

Human technology saw to it that it was not long before the first cities sprang up. Aware that the profusion of different languages had always kept Mankind divided, Emperor Zhell took measures to fix that. Unlike the Cobollians, which agreed to maintain two of the most common spoken languages from the old world, Zhell restricted the Humans to a single predominant one: "One Tongue, One People" was the motto of this controversial law. While this law would influence language down through the ages, to his frustration numerous cultural groups, such as the nobles from the ancient House of Cron, refused to abandon their ancestral language, while his "Universal" tongue would come to be "polluted by alien vernaculars," as he put it.

With the reveal of another Star Temple available to them—one that could seemingly reach anywhere in the galaxy—the new Notronians could infoliate the spheres, establishing colonies on planets far and wide. The government was keen to send to alien worlds engineers and technicians along with diplomats, scientists, and teachers, ostensibly to learn as much as they could from their neighbors across the cosmos, though the actual objective was to obtain xenotechnology and weapons.

For many, however, Notron's Infinity Gate was a chance to become pioneers, to travel and explore alien cultures, to escape the growing authoritarianism of the Zhell Imperium, and, for some, to raise a personal empire outside of moral laws and the concerned gaze of onlookers. Such was the case for the dynasty of Seth.

During the Cosmic Wars, some even pushed on as far as the dwarf galaxies, for it was rumored that these were unspoilt paradises where food and resources grew wild and in abundance and where treasures beyond reckoning were there for the taking.

For certain, each of the satellite galaxies had their share of sublime wonders, mysteries, and intrigues, and into each had the Enemy sought to gain a foothold.

In his later years, Emperor Zhell became apoplectic at the idea that anyone would seek to leave *his* world—as he now considered it—perceiving that it meant a decrease in its prestige and power. He passed laws making it much harder for commoners to travel abroad and posted armed soldiers at the Infinity Gate. The exorbitant fees and extensive paperwork, however, proved no impediment for the wealthy, with loopholes allowing prominent families to set up estates, fiefdoms, banks, and storage facilities across the various Core Worlds in places such as Anaxes, Shawken, Vahalii, Aargau, Axum, Grizmallt, Rendili, and more.

Furthermore, while Zhell authorities disappeared political opponents to newly designated prison worlds, political allies, corporations, and the military were encouraged to seek out planets that held valuable resources, leading to corporate collectives and science firms colonizing places like Tion, Serenno, Drayen, and Eriadu.

Tilotny had had enough. Now appearing as Via, Goddess of the Living Galaxy, she tasked Ap with creating a window in space for the Humans of Notron to see and hear her. To mitigate the terror they might feel, she brought forth treasures: "For the good citizens of the Galactic Core: gifts I bring you of advanced medicine and technology. It was I who provided the gate that first brought you from your prior world, and I who gave you this one so that you may always be free to roam as you will. No longer will corrupt overlords control it. No longer will the stars be delegated to a privileged few."

The Humans of the Core marveled at this speech, and when it was reported that Emperor Zhell was dead, having foolishly tried to defy Tilotny's decree, they knew she had spoken true. Indeed, any successor attempting similar defiance fell foul of her wrath, and several did not last out their terms.

Thus, the Infinity Gate became open and free again, and in this way did Vianism flourish and become widespread until it was eventually the state religion. So too did it spread into the stars with travelers extolling Tilotny's life-giving aspects, celebrated as the Beatific Countenance, and her punitive aspects as the Glorious Radiance.

AN ORATORIO OF ONRAI

Tilotny tasked Splendid Ap to create windows to every world, save for the Earthworlds and the planets upon which the Humans voyaged, so that the Firstborn and all of their many offspring would see the Architects as giant apparitions in the sky and hear Tilotny's resounding voice. In this way did the Architects revealed themselves to the galaxy.

"Children of the galaxy: I am the Goddess Onrai, Queen of the Stars, Lady of the Land and Sea, Eternal Grace, Maker and Mother, and the Architect who shaped all things. Here too are my brothers: the ineffable Kopa Khan and the incomprehensible Ap'aci. We have come to right a great wrong. The ones who have positioned themselves above you claim to be your benefactors, but they have held back from you much that you were meant to have, for they fear that you will amass as much power

as they and will no longer have need of them! Nor have they even told you of the coming of the belligerent race of Humans and other dangers looming on the horizon. But we wish to see you safe from these marauders and free to achieve your full potential. If this is your wish too, you need but give us a sign—a few sparing drops of precious blood—and we shall provide you what you desire, including the means to protect yourselves from the danger that lies ahead, which is far more than the paltry gifts your jealous overlords have sparingly apportioned out!"

This was a strange speech, with ideas yet unknown amongst the races of Skyriver, but Tilotny succeeded in planting the seeds of doubt. So it was by means of the Architects that the dual and opposing forces of desire and fear would begin their evil and irresistible enchantment.

For their part, the Celestials strove to warn the galaxy. Appearing in a similar manner above the manifold worlds, they declared: "Do not pay heed to this Onrai, for she is a goddess of nothing. We are the *true* architects of this galaxy, and obeisance we pay to the Eternal alone. Do not be induced to serve her out of dread or lust for her secrets, for though there have been ominous portents of late, you have nothing to fear! As to that race called Humans who have come to share some of our worlds and systems, be neither unkind *nor* unwary of their inherent danger, for although good exists in many, a curse yet lays upon them. Moreover, do not imitate their ways or be induced to their violence, greed, or exercise of power over others, for then we would be forced to depart from you, and this would prove grievous to all, for you are our offspring, and we are your loving protectors and guides."

Despite the wisdom of this speech, some of the offspring of the Firstborn began to wonder if indeed their makers were holding things back from them, and a few of the Precursors questioned whether the Celestials had as well, and amongst these, several races began to pull apart, argue amongst themselves, and seek independence. More would follow as the Serpent People went forth now to proselytize to those worlds questioning the Firstborn or Celestials. But amongst numerous civilizations, Onrai came to be known as the Queen of Air and Darkness, as many—especially those of the Elder Races—regarded her statements as the half-truths that they were and felt dread in their hearts, knowing that out of this calumny great evil would arise.

With Mankind spreading out across the expanse, so too spread the creatures they'd brought with them, including those arbitrarily chosen as pets, prey, or property. In concert with this, slugthrowers became ubiquitous, and with the technological advances they'd gained, needle guns, heat-ray guns, disintegrators, lasers rifles, pulse guns pistols, plasma guns, and blasters would follow.

To the pacifistic Precursors and their like-minded offspring, this was all anathema. A few reached out to help the Humans to better their ways, and these efforts bore some fruit, so that nonlethal shockers replaced deadly weapons for a time. Not a few took this to mean that perhaps the Humans had changed their ways and become part of the peaceful galactic community. But it was not to be. The Empyrean Wars that later erupted brought to their shores legions of tenebrous invaders and arcane killing machines—and so would weapons of death and destruction return to the fore.

And as foretold, the debased ways of Human culture came to eventually infest the inhabitants of the galaxy, who grew ever more entangled with them and forgot the warnings of the Celestials to embrace the customs of this provocative new people. This first occurred for those races who'd interacted with them for a longer period of time, such as those who dwelt in the Earthworld systems.

For most, the Humans were yet regarded as novel and quaint. As sexual intermixing of the galaxy's races had been intended by the Celestials, countless variations had long before arisen to become peoples of their own. So too did Human variants now begin to emerge after Humans mutated and/or cohabited with the numerous humanoid races they befriended and bonded with, giving rise to the countless near-Human or once-Human races, a small sampling of which include the Mirialan, Firrerreo, Teevan, Ubese, Vultan, Lorrdian, Dantari, Sorrusian, Ogemite, Sobram, Vorzydiak, Pugnarans, Zennite, Ghostling, Morganians, Sylphe, Atoans, Ovoni, Agamarians, Lethagoe, Darians, Dorians, Nulls, Mosciive, Severeem, Latarzians, Turians, O'reenians, Mikoans, Sakuubians, Irathients, Psychons, Dorcons, Noorians, Ocsinin, Kaldorians, Epicanthix, Seikoshans, Morellians, Qiraash, Reigat, Sernpidalians, Ventooinans, Gilvahns, the Umbaran-Palliduvan-Rattataki branches, the Echani-Castithan-Arkanian offshoots, and the Aruzan-Samuac-Wroonian-Pantoran-Syreen family groups, out of which came the Darga-Chiss offshoots.[18]

CYRANNIS

It took one hundred and twenty-five years for the Ark ships carrying the twelve nations of Cobol to arrive, terraform, and settle unto the twelve worlds of the Cyrannis system. The capital world was, thereafter, nicknamed Earth in homage to the old world that they knew of in story, and there they enjoyed eight hundred years of relative peace, growth, and prosperity, unable to imagine that anything could ever shatter their great society.

During that period, events were in motion that few could foresee, and these were spurred on by not only the words of the Architects and Celestials but by the chain reaction that was about to occur across many worlds… a chain reaction that would find its point of origin on Notron.

In the long and onerous aeons ahead, the Cyrannis system would come to be known as the Hellios system, and none would remember its ancient triumphs and tragedies.

[18] Dorians descend from early attempts at GeNode cloning. The Turians of Limbala should not be confused with the grey-skinned, reptavian natives of Massula.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

CLASH OF THE ZHELL AND TAUNG

In less than two generations, the Humans of Notron had begun to backslide into bad habits. The fact that they had come from another world, let alone a world before that, was questioned, then disbelieved, discarded, and at last forgotten as they took Notron to be a *Zhell* world… and one that belonged to them alone.

Though they lived separate and apart, there had been peace with the indigenous Taung; their architectural style was even imitated and expanded upon by early designers who sought to move away from the aesthetics of Urthha. Yet, as the population kept growing and their cities spread out, the old hierarchies and systems of domination reasserted themselves; expediency supplanted craftmanship, practicality overthrew art, and greed trumped all else so that larger and larger sections of Notron were remade into lavish, sprawling cities. With the ecumenopolis expanding upon the once natural environs, the increasingly exasperated Taung began to see their world change in ways they did not approve of.

Statesmen spoke eloquent words of progress and took no stock of the wishes of their aboriginal neighbors, who were thought of as inferior brutes. When Emperor Arden Zhell II came to power, a xenophobe like his namesake, he discussed with his advisors what could be done about "the Taung problem," as too much attention had already been drawn to their plight, with demands of a statute limiting advancement, expansion, and development by a demanding segment of the population. Making a show of controverting his advisors, he conceded to have his barristers draw up a treaty. After it was signed with great fanfare, it was announced the Taung and the Humans had "reached a historic compromise for the sake of peace and friendship."

The Taung were a wise race, but they did not comprehend the circuitous loopholes, provisions, and exigencies inserted in the document, for the tactics of deceit and manipulation were unknown to them and they believed they'd come to a mutually beneficial resolution. But after only a few years, they learned otherwise when urban sprawl encroached onto their territories and public lands. Thinking perhaps that the Humans reckoned measurements differently, they moved further away, but after a few years their lands were encroached upon again. And so it happened like this over and again. And each time they brought the matter to court, they were shown that it was perfectly legal according to the papers they'd signed. Attempts to have the treaty redrafted or amended were met with insurmountable legal hurdles.

After long years of trying and failing diplomatic attempts to reach a compromise, including the secession of more lands *if* the law could but be revised to allow a greater measure of equity, but this was met with silence or hostility. The successors of Zhell II feigned no love for the Taung, who were by now openly protesting and bringing lawsuits on the grounds of ecocide. Presidents Praji, Shawken, and Lytton would not even so much as acknowledge them, using their media propagandists to

refer to the Taung as "alien extremists" trying to renege on their agreement, extort money, and even push the Humans off Notron. These lies were repeated with enough frequency and outrage that they took hold in the minds of the public, who spent all of their time in the cities and had no idea what was going on across the frontiers.

A handful of journalists and curious citizens looked into the matter, saw the truth of the Taungs' claims, and tried to make the public understand that whether through apathy or willful intent, irrevocable harm was being done to these people and the planet they shared, but their voices were less heard and held less sway compared to the media apparatus of the corporations and their political allies.

As more evidence was brought to light, however, it sparked a movement led by scientists and religious leaders to stop the expansion of the Zhell megalopolis altogether. Having each come to the same conclusions, they spoke out against the infringement on the rights of the native peoples and the ecological calamity that would befall them all should urban development continue unchecked. Their incessant protests were at first an annoyance and easily discredited as fringe radicalism, but as support for the Taung and their native lands began to gain traction, they could no longer be ignored or dismissed. The government sent provocateurs to infiltrate the protests and trigger violence and property damage. Scandals were conjured up out of whole cloth that said the movement leaders were extreme anti-Vianists who really wanted the lands for themselves and were working with the Taung to get rich.

Most of the public believed this, and so the government used the charges of collusion and fraud to get them them arrested, put on a sham trial, and exiled from Notron to a newly established prison colony on the fifth planet of the Seoul system.

Another group who hadn't spoken out earlier had recently organized themselves into the Peace Bringers. They made a public spectacle in protest against the lies and draconian measures of the Anaxes administration, and rather than recant, they threw in their lot with the unlawfully imprisoned and were exiled to Archanon.[19]

To silence dissent once and for all and cow further "seditious sentiment," President Anaxes tasked the Fifth Battalion to use force against Taung demonstrators, unaware that the Taung could not physically be harmed at this time. Nevertheless, the assault accomplished a different end: it enraged the Taung, who were aghast to see the Humans with whom they'd agreed to share their world, and whose leaders were guilty of gross perfidy, actually try to harm them!

Bitterly did the Taung brood and argue their next course of action. Grappling with the hard truth that their words and protests would continue to go unheeded, it was acknowledged that the only thing the Zhell understood was violence. Reasoning that once the Taung proved they were serious, the Humans would respect their wishes and allow the Taung to live in peace within the originally agreed upon boundaries. Some weeks after arriving at this decision, the Taung blew up the Royal Chambers of Zhell.

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[19] The Peace Bringers would be remembered years after establishing their colony on Archanon for their attempts to eradicate violence from their genetic makeup. Prematurely declaring that science had conquered the problem of evil, they sent out emissaries to persuade others to join them. All seemed well until emissaries on Corona V were infected by a mysterious ailment they called the Killing Sickness that gradually made the infected more and more violent.

Although this was done late in the evening so as not to cause injury to anyone, President Anaxes was furious and framed it as a pretext for war.

To ensure the public was sufficiently outraged, he had several criminals executed, put in the uniforms of soldiers, and burned as if from the blast. The bodies were then arranged around the blast site, ensuring that the media—once allowed in—would record every gory detail.

The expected anger followed. In a matter of hours, the public was demanding the heads of the terrorist monsters. Rather than leave them in peace as they had hoped, President Anaxes declared war on the Taung. In short order, the Thirteen Battalions were marching across their territories, burning their homes, bombing their sacred places, and attempting, in vain, to slaughter them.

A fiercely proud people, it did not take much for the Taung to conclude that there was only one way to reclaim their world from the teeming, murderous hordes. The Celestials and several of their sibling races pleaded with them not to pursue this course, urging them to relocate or emigrate through their Hypergate to resettle on any of the many vacant or sparsely-inhabited worlds of their choosing. But they had already relocated several times over the centuries, and they would accept no solution that meant leaving Notron, causing the Celestials to once more repeat their warning.

An outspoken Taung leader, Arasuum, advocated for peace, but by the end of their assembly, even he conceded, unwilling to defy the wishes of the majority. Forsaking their once peaceful ways to become warriors, the Taung declared *Akaanati'kar'oya*, the "War of Life and Death," severing their ties to the Elder Races and Celestials and losing their immortality.

To replace their erstwhile guardians and ensure their people would not stray from the path they'd set themselves on, the Taung Council of Chieftains, led by Kad Ha'rangir, brought into being a priest class. Later, upon Ha'rangir's death in battle, the priests deified him as the God of War. For this reason, he is portrayed in the Canons of Honor as the way towards growth and strength. Unfortunately, for Arasuum, upon his death, he was demonized into the Sloth God of Stagnation.

The Taung's reign of terror was first visited upon the smaller cities that had transgressed the agreed upon boundaries—for though they still believed in honor they were determined now to live up to the reputation of brutality and cold-bloodedness that they'd been branded with. After making great strides, they took to the larger cities that had been built on Taung lands. But these were better defended, and they were forced to withdraw. Also, the Humans possessed too great an advantage in weaponry.

It was with great reluctance that the priests made the requisite blood sacrifice and called upon the Architects for aid. With that done, they called to their allies of old.

With new tools provided them, they fashioned weapons unique to their culture, trained, and went back on the offensive. From the capital city of Great Zhell which had been defiantly built on sacred lands at the foot of Omboro, the dormant volcano, Rexutu the Unconquerable, Olhak the Reaver, and the mighty Doom of Ulmarah led their massive warriors into battle. Tooth and claw they fought against the Battalions of Zhell, driving them back until they were pressed against the murky forests.

And from the penumbral depths of the trees, their secret allies came rushing out.

The Humbaba were an indigenous underground race who'd allowed the Taung to alter them into the fierce fighters that the Humans called Ogres. The Humbaba had done this gladly. For too long they'd suffered the incessant noise and pollution from the obnoxious machinery employed by the inhabitants above so that when the time came, they readily burst up from their homes in the underlands with great axes and massive arms, grateful for the opportunity to silence the nasty noisemakers.

The toll inflicted on the Human invaders that day was shocking even to the battle-hardened Zhell. Yet, for all the hammer blows they had inflicted on their enemies, the Taung were less experienced in the ways of war. Of their leaders, all but two were left. But they could not stop now that they had embarked on this course, not until every last Human had departed or every last Taung was dead, and it is said that the fires they built for the Doom of Ulmarah's pyre rose so high that it could be seen from the far-off gray towers, and the Zhell trembled at its portent.

And so the Zhell brought their fiercest weapons to bear, fireballs that razed the forests and blackened the skies. But the Taung would no longer leave things to chance, and once more they called upon the Architects. Admiring their passion, Cold Danda Sine heeded the call. The Battalions of Zhell grew suspicious when they saw the Ogres withdraw, but President Anaxes hailed it as a sign of surrender, and when several days passed without sight of the Taung forces, they declared victory.

It was during while they were celebrating in the capital and abroad that death came for them. Cold Danda Sine caused great Omboro to erupt in a mighty expulsion of fire and ash, ending life for kilometers around. In a rare appearance, he himself attended the obsequies, earning him the sobriquet Vol from the watching Taung.

The Humans of Notron were horrified. And they made their own prayers, calling upon their Goddess Via, the Eternal Grace and Queen of the Core (a title that later came to refer to Coruscant). As these were her people, having brought them to this world, Tilotny felt sympathy for them. So the divine Via descended from the sky to snatch victory from the hands of the Taung, who had taken advantage of the event to sweep into other cities with the intent of driving the Humans off of Notron or slaughtering them. She blew away the ash that would stain the skies for the next two years, capped the volcano with a fearsome blast of ice, and caused the Taung to tremble in fear. This reenergized Zhell's forces to achieve victory.

For the Taung remnant, the irony did not escape them that in order to preserve their race, they would have to abandon their beloved world after all, and long would they reflect on whether the ideology of Kad Ha'rangir was really of strength and growth or suffering and destruction. The newly appointed Taung leadership vowed to never again be vulnerable. With ships provided by the Inscrutible One—as Splendid Ap was known to them—they departed through their Hypergate to resettle on Roon.

The dead on Notron could not be counted and the people would not celebrate. President Anaxes was blamed for all that had transpired, and before he could be brought to trial, he was assassinated. His successor, President Vahalii, said it was time to mourn and rename their world, settling on the ironic name of Pax. The populace continued to honor Via, their Mistress and Liberator who saved them from the blades of the Taung and the fires of Vol, and a year later, they instituded a week-long fete that is still celebrated today as the Festival of Life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ERA OF THE SUPERNAUT

Whether by injection, cybernetic implants, bionic-tech, or supernatural means, Human augmentation had become commonplace on the Earth-worlds for elite task forces, soldiers, and special agents. But genetic amplification had its limits and could result in psychosis and a higher proclivity for aggression. The crucial ingredient, what could not be injected or supernaturally imposed, was devotion. Tilotny knew then that she needed her most loyal—those who would help enforce her benevolent will—to fully open themselves up to her and the process.

Yet basking in the warm glow of her adorers, Via called for brave volunteers who were driven by justice to serve as a police force not only on Pax but throughout the galaxy. While some came from the ranks of the Battalions, most came from the general public. She took her sebaceous recruits to Nessem for a special kind of augmentation. The stronger ones were given added strength, for they were to serve as her Peacekeepers, the first of her galactic police forces that would uphold her authority. Those with less physical potential were re-shaped into her Eidolon Priests, and they were sent to establish temples on Qujaga in Wild Space and Arnessk in the Unknown Regions with the power to facilitate pacific amity amongst the belligerent, for such would be needed once she established galactic emancipation.

She visited other Human colonies around the galaxy, seeking others who might serve as devoted followers. As the goddess, Vahl, she raised up the Chosen of Vahl and the Vahl-Kirian Warriors from the Vahla on Ambria and Tirahn. In the Core, she touched the Valhallan of Vahalii (later Kaikielius) and elevated the Valau on Valusia (later Vahlusia and Velusia) to be her warrior-priests against the serpentine Valusians who opposed her, before transforming the rest into those Mer People known as the Aquar, who were to spread the Vision of Vahl to the underwater races.[20]

Therewith, she turned her sights to her peoples on Cyrannis and Terra II, who were now embroiled in the fires of madness, murder, and mayhem.

SHATTERING SYMBIOSIS

As if an odd echo of the Dawn Age, the Sephi were the first of the Elder Races to spread out and build a far-reaching and benevolent monarchy, and with the coming of the Architects and Man, the first to fall, caught betwixt competing principles, factions, and the internecine struggles that erupted from the question of apposite Human interaction and the growing and complicated reality of Sephi-Human offspring.

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[20] When the Valau later contested amongst themselves over theological issues, those called the Vahl-Khan emerged the victor, leaving the traditional Valau to be exiled to Nagoa.

The fragmentation of the Sephi was not readily known at first, for they were quick to clean up and conceal their messes. They would have been wiser to obtain the counsel of the Celestials or reach out to the Firstborn Council who had now begun to assemble as the Conclave of the Firstborn, for they could not long curtail the slow decline of their great kingdom, but they remained a steadfastly private and prideful race that sought to manage their own affairs.

But eventually their disputes would spread and come to blemish the peace of the galaxy as other races contended with them. This, of course, was the intent of the Architects, to whom some of these factions would turn.

But it served the Dark Powers as well who had begun in secret to tempt and divide.

Two of the early races they caused to fall were the Jostran and Sobekk.

Offspring of the Firstborn Xaxax, the Jostran of Kiilpar (now Cilpar) had once been a gracious and honorable race of meter-long annelids welcomed across the galaxy. Ruled by Atok the Elder, the Jostran held a symbiotic relationship with their cousin race, the reptilian Sobekk, offspring of the Tor-Ohnahmi.

The oldest Sobekk branch dwelt on Sylenia I, which neighbored Cyrannis. After the Sephi, the Sobekk had grown into one of the most widespread races in the galaxy, expanding to numerous worlds under the authority of the Sobekk'ek, the ten united clan leaders also called the Sobekk Sovereigns, who sparred as friendly rivals in a variety of competitions held across the galaxy known as the Sobekk Games. These competitions drew tremendous crowds and precipitated modern-day sky rowing, spheredunking, bolo-ball (called Meshgeroya in Mando'a), logarithm striding, gooth ball, pyramid, blitzball, socorr (later phrenbi), chin-bret, and horizon skimming.

The Sobekk Sovereigns, along with chosen participants drawn from lotteries, gathered annually on Geognôsis, the homeworld of their friends, the Greedle—an insectoid race created by the Gree—for the Festival of the Attaching. The rite had gone on for uncounted years and involved a mutually beneficial pairing in which participating Jostran physically attached themselves to their Sobekk counterparts for one lunar cycle. The results saw each gain increased vitality and knowledge that they passed onto their offspring. The Greedle Queen who hosted the event also benefited from a lesser form of this at the end of the lunar cycle when the Atokki (the name given to participating Jostran annelids) left its Sobekk companion and briefly attached to her.

This age-old event would end on one night.

Eldest of the ten Sobekk Sovereigns, Cyllene exercised great responsibilities on Sylenia I, which he gracefully managed alongside his mate, Queen Sillena, for long years. When the Humans first spread across the dozen worlds of the Cyrannis system, it was seen as a mere curiosity. But after word arrived that their previous habitation on Cobol led to that world's decline, the people of Sylenia I grew wary. They did not wish to be uncharitable, but what they'd heard of this carnivorous, xenophobic, and mentally underdeveloped race was troubling. When it was further learned that another Human faction fought a genocidal war against the Taung who'd been forced to flee Notron in exile, concern grew to fear. Such a thing had never in the history of

Skyriver occurred. And although there were no gates on the worlds of the Cyrannis system, the Humans had ships that could glide across space like Ythillin Wasps.

Cyllene addressed the nation, hoping to use logic to put their fears to rest. "Even if the Humans truly despoiled their world," he told his people, "they will surely have learned from their mistakes… and whatever magic propels their Ark ships, it would take them long years to travel, and why would they come here? Besides, surely we aught not judge these particular Humans for the evils of another faction."

With such sentiments, Cyllene felt content that he'd assuaged any apprehensions, and after bidding his son a pleasant sleep cycle, he retired with his mate to their warm bark-and-leaf pile. But that very day he had a terrifying dream of the Taung genocide. He thought little of it when he arose that night, but the next day's dream was worse. He saw Sobekk worlds beset by wars, plagues, and metallic monstrosities. So vivid had the vision been that for several nights he could not shake the horror of it.

A week passed before Cyllene had another dream in which he journeyed through a foggy marsh, pursued by some creature he could not see. When he came upon a great tree-castle, he felt relieved and entered its open arched door. Following a lengthy corridor gleaming with silver and gold, he was led him to a sparkling room made of auridium; a carmine glow oscillated along the walls and floor. There upon a tall columnated throne sat the reptilian master of the house in a silky red cloak. As it swiveled to face him, he got a better look at its ugly bulbous head, which appeared disconcertingly Sobekkian: "The Human vermin remains unchecked," the master whispered sibilantly. "Not content to stay upon their pestilential worlds, they have begun to spread into the galaxy. They will come to sweep across Sylenia… unless *you* aid me in stopping them."

"Who are you that I should listen to you?"

"One who can give you and your people the security the Celestials and Architects *—in their coming war with one another—*cannot. As to who *I* am: I am of the Greater Powers and most ancient races. You may refer to me as Count Eosforos."

"That does not explain how you know these things," Cyllene challenged.

"Meet me on the morrow at dusk at the tallest Boab tree…" and with that, Cyllene awoke. Unable to sleep, he thought upon what to do but decided he would not take counsel with anyone until he could ascertain the veracity of these matters.

"My people run a groundcar plant out of the Cyrannis system," the Count informed Cyllene the next day as they strolled along the heather-covered path behind the Boab tree. Still surprised that Eosforos was real and not a figment of his fevered fantasies, the Count seemed far less of a preternatural being in person, ordinary even as he talked about his company's intelligent vehicle interfaces. "My managers at Knight Industries informed me of the war that the Human government is planning."

"Why, then, do you come to *me* and not the Torons or Celestials?" Cyllene asked suspiciously, referring to their Tor-Ohnahmi parent race by their cognomen.

"The Celestials quarrel with the Architects, who are their *secret* offspring, while the Tor-Ohnahmi dither and deliberate, regretting their recent course of action. I need a champion such as you who I can elevate to bring about justice and ensure the safety of your people."

"What would you have me do?" Cyllene inquired, feeling a stirring of pride coupled with a prickle of fear that he couldn't quantify.

"Power and dominion would already be yours were it not for the Jostran secretly draining your essence."

"That is untrue," Cyllene retorted. "We have exchanged energies for years too long to number."

"I know, for I was there at the start. But as the years passed, the Jostran began taking more than they gave. It is not the fault of the people. Atok has become greedy of late. To prove this, I will restore to you what you have been denied. Would this be agreeable to you?" Upon granting his consent, Cyllene felt a rush of dynamic energy akin to what occurred during the Attaching but faster and more intense.

As this was going on, a similar exchange was happening with Atok, who had also been having nightmares followed by a vision of a vaguely shaped worm-king who warned him about the Humans, the discord of their parent race, and the way in which the Sobekk had been taking more than they gave due to the greed of Cyllene.

When the annual Attaching arrived and Atok and Cyllene met again, their mutual mistrust made their discourse awkward at first before turning subtly impolite and then openly hostile. After a sharp exchange, the event was cancelled. This came as a shock to all present, as the Attaching had gone on for as long as anyone could remember.

The Tor-Ohnahmi and Xaxax heard of the dispute and sent a commission. The former were bipedal repto-mammals whose faces bore a row of teeth that resembled toothlike bars. The latter resembled bioluminescent cnidarians and were surprised when Atok asked them if there was dissension amongst them. When they confessed that there had been some disagreement over various matters, Cyllene then demanded to know of the Torons if they regretted advocating war against the Architects, and this they acknowledged. As to how Atok and Cyllene had come by this information, the two dissembled, putting forth pat answers while privately confirming that the entity of their vision had spoken truthfully in regard to their parent races being unable to help them. Nonetheless, they agreed to abstain from fighting one another, though they would not reinstate the Attaching, convinced that the other had secretly been cheating them. The Firstborn departed, glad to have averted escalation but concerned that some danger was at hand and that their offspring were concealing it.

To mitigate the apprehensions of the Sobekk'ek, who felt they were losing much from this separation from the Jostran, Cyllene extended the promise made to him by the Count that they would regain their glory and power by means of arms with which they would protect their people and the galaxy from the Humans. His visions, which he now shared with them, had shown him what must be done to bring this about. Reluctantly, the Sobekk'ek agreed but added a caveat. "We will not declare war. The Humans must first attack us. Otherwise, the Sobekk Nation will face opposition from the Council of the Firstborn and myriad of our galactic brethren."

The Sobekk Sovereigns convinced their people to start manufacturing technology according to the designs Cyllene provided, and Sylenia's greatest minds led teams of Sobekk from across their worlds towards the construction of various parts.

"It must be tested," Count Eosforos demanded once the sundry parts had been completed and assembled by a trusted handful of top scientists, "and the Herglics, who live near the Humans on Hasari and have been providing aid to them, would be an apt target."

The Herglics were a race of bipedal cetaceans that the Humans called "Land-whales." This hardly offended them, as the Herglics, unlike their Houk brother race, had what some considered a raucous sense of humor and would often refer to the Sobekk as "Lizard-people" and the Jostran as "Worm-people," to the chagrin of both.

"You are talking *murder!*" Cyllene railed. "We will defend our homes if need be, but we will not instigate war!"

"You need only destroy an empty camp on Hasari where weapons are being manufactured, but it must be at night, when the Herglics are asleep in their homes. Once they and the Humans see what the Sobekk are capable of, you will *prevent* war!"

Swayed by the Count's words, Cyllene and the Sobekk'ek ordered the strike. Only later was it known that the Hasari camp did not manufacture weapons but innovative medicines and medical technology. Furthermore, there were Humans at the camp as well as the near-Human, multi-eyed, multi-mouthed Tucana from Tucan, many of whom died during the blast.

When the Herglics learned from survivors noted that reptilian aliens had committed the act, and that these were in fact Sobekk, they were shocked, but they urged the Human leaders of Cyrannis to forestall vengeance until they had more information, warning them that the Sobekk Nations were considerable in numbers.

The Sobekk'ek were shocked to have discovered they had committed murder. But when they confessed to their people that they'd struck a Human encampment, the people welcomed the news: "They murdered the Taung and took their world! How long before they come for us?" With this general consensus, the Sovereigns agreed to keep watch, but they were disturbed and hoped to avert further conflict.

It was not long afterwards that Sylenia was hit with an ailment of mysterious origin that afflicted nearly a quarter of its population. Although most recovered, illness and death were new to the Sobekk. Also, Queen Sillena was amongst those who'd died. Mad with grief, Cyllene blamed the Humans for spreading the pestilence. Count Eosforos postulated that it might have been carried by the Sylphe of nearby Sylvia IV. The Sylphe traded with Sobekk and Humans and would have been unaware of and unaffected by the disease the Humans had transmitted to them.

The Sobekk declared war on Mankind and on any who aided them, begetting years of bloodshed and misery.[21] Targets included the Herglic and the Delphian Empire, with the Sobekk deploying death squads to its capital, Gamoray, to seize their industrial infrastructure while exterminating the entire populace.[22]

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[21] An offspring race of the Sephi, the Sylphe were notably left off this list as the Sobekk did not wish to antagonize so powerful a people.

[22] Though the Delphian Empire was destroyed during this war, a small handful of survivors dispersed to establish colonies on Delfii, Delphania, and the Delphidian Cluster.

When Cyrannis discovered the belligerent reptiles now harassing their comical and helpful whale-like allies, they came with ships and weapons to aid them, an act of sacrifice long-remembered by the Herglic, who mythologised it to the degree that aeons hence, they peacefully annexed their vast Trade Empire to the Old Republic when Humans once again reached out to them in friendship.

Over the next few lunar cycles, under the guidance of Count Eosforos, Sobekk construction ramped up in the production of new and unusual technology across nearly all of their worlds. This was promoted as the Great Transreptilian Movement, but not all of the Sobekk were pleased.

Unas of the Unagin clan, who had earlier opposed this plan, departed under the cover of day to inform the Tor-Ohnahmi. When they heard of it, they visited Cyllene and the Sovereigns, who'd gathered on Sylenia I, to counsel them against this course. But when the Sobekk'ek turned them away, the Torons sent a warning to the Sobekk Nations to shun their evil counsel. In response, Cyllene told the people: "The Tor-Ohnahmi peacemongers fear our rise in prominence and do not want to share the glory they believe is theirs alone."

Now the Sobekk became divided amongst themselves, with Unas and others opposing the Sobekk'ek, deeming it prudent to build an armada to defend their people against reprisals from their own kind. All who felt as they did fled the Sylenia system and their respective homeworlds to resettle on Unagin.

But scores had joined the Great Transreptilian Movement, eager for the promised ascendency that Count Eosforos said would see their life-forces transferred to superior bodies. When the time came, the Sobekk Sovereigns drew from a lottery to determine in what order their clans would go to Sylenia I to gain ascension. Their top scientists were selected to be given more advanced cybernetic bodies, for they were to serve in a different capacity in the new hegemony.

In the Grand Citadel of Sobakii, the mysterious Count Eosforos appeared for the first time before Cyllene's people, his amorphously reptilian form now lambent. "Since the Celestials will not help you, nor the Torons bring you justice, I have come to give you the power you will need to become strong enough to defeat the invaders. In but a few moments you will possess invulnerable, glorious bodies that will never grow old, become sick, or die. Nor will you require the aid of the greedy Jostran-worms as you rise to become an unstoppable force for good!"

At that, he drew open the curtain behind him to reveal a massive chamber in which stood, row upon row, gleaming robot bodies without count. Next to each of the durable, silver-metallic frames sat a kind of sarcophagous attached by cables. Nine special units, which appeared the most reptilian in form, stood ready for the chief scientists.

Although many had worked on the individual parts, their tasks had been compartmentalized so that only Cyllene of the Sobekk'ek had seen the prototype fully assembled. Seeing so many at once was a marvel unimagined, and not a few grew anxious, though they quelled their doubts for fear of looking foolish before their peers who beamed with pride for being the first chosen to enter the sarcophagi.

Before the Sobekk'ek committed to the process, they announced that their eldest male and female heirs were prohibited from undergoing tranformation; in the event

that anything went wrong, a remnant of their bloodline must go on. Count Eosforos barely concealed his displeasure at having not been informed of this beforehand, but he otherwise remained silent.

At Cyllene's signal, the Sobekk lined up and began stepping into the sarcophagi. Once they were all inside, he inaugurated the sequence. "You are Sobekk no more," Cyllene announced, "but Centurions of the new Xylan Empire!" When they emerged, they were as machine beings. The new hierarchy was accepted and understood by his command, for unquestioned loyalty had already been programmed into them. As the cybernetic Xylan marched to the edges of the chamber, another batch of robot bodies was brought out. Then, the next group of Sobekk were brought in and placed into the sarcophagi. So the process repeated until they numbered in the tens of thousands. For Cyllene, now known as Czar Sobekkek, the first order he gave his metallic monsters was to begin the construction of great ships and armaments.

When the opposing Sobekk caught sight of the gleaming new Centurions, they grew fearful, realizing that they'd been right to resist the Great Transreptilian Movement and that Cyllene had deceived his people into becoming an army for him. Knowing they would need more than arms to oppose him should he turn on them, the remaining Sobekk began inviting the leaders of other reptilian races to join forces with them to build a competing force to deal with this threat.

This would later become known as the Endless Empire.

Once his fleet was complete, Czar Sobekkek inaugurated a reign of terror against the Endless Empire that dared oppose him. With this act of violence against their former kin, the minds of the Centurions locked in place with their bodies: "We are strong. We are pure. We are loyal. We will kill for the Xylan Empire."

But the killing of fellow Sobekk had consequences, and from amongst his own people a Sobekk Resistance arose. Count Eosforos had an answer to this as well: "They think you a tyrant and coward. Show them you are not!"

Intel had come to the leaders of the Sobekk Resistance informing them that while his forces went on the offensive, Cyllene would be lightly guarded in the Xylan capital, now called Xylonia. On the night that they attacked, hoping to cut the head off the snake, the Count urged the Czar to lead by example: "Will you kneel to the masses that flood your gates, or will you embrace the immortality of your people?"

Cyllene conceded to the inevitable. He wasn't sure why he'd hesitated as long as he had, but once inside the sarcophagous, a stab of doubt and suspicion returned. Too late to turn back, the process of transferring the spirit and mind into a mechanical body was no gentle one but that of anguish and unbearable pain, and what resulted was not the triumphant elevation Cyllene had imagined, but a plunge into psychosis. Still conscious, he realized that he was not emerging an ascended being, but a monster, and he gave futile vent to his rage and fear. Mental torture was a part of the process. The Count had kept this from him, as he had the infusion of Human genetic material into their brains, the sole organic tissue that remained of the Sobekk.

After the grueling procedure had ended, Cyllene lifted up his robotic arm, staring in horror at it. It coldly dawned on him that he'd been tricked and that in his arrogance, he'd doomed his entire race to mechanistic enslavement. But independent

thinking was a struggle now as he felt the pressing need to obey. Then, he caught the smile on the Count's face and at last understood that this had been his plan all along. The very nightmares that sent him down this path had come from Eosforos.

Fury overtook him as he burst forth in an attempt to destroy the Count, but clumsy in this new, unnatural body, he wobbled off-balance. Finally, he engaged the rifle lying at his side and shot the grinning Count again and again. That was when the depth of his betrayal hit home: *the Count could not be destroyed*.

The leaders of the Sobekk Resistance just then broke into the chamber. They already thought Cyllene mad and, now, seeing him as one of the mechanical monsters shooting and raging at some invisible foe, they supposed he had a complete breakdown. He wanted to explain that he'd made a mistake and must stop the other Sobekk from undergoing the process, but in his rage at the laughing Count that only he could see, he managed to hoarsely croak, "The Dark One deceived us all," before they began shooting him. Nor did they stop until he was fully disintegrated.

The Count then sprang his trap. Czar Sobekk'ek had served as bait. Xylan Centurions entered in the hundreds, shooting and killing the Resistance leaders before departing, swooping off in their deadly ships to destroy the rest.

Henceforth, the remaining nine Sobekk'ek would rule their empire as Imperious Leaders. Should any of them be destroyed, their heirs would succeed them. Should any of those perish or prove disloyal, a new leader would be chosen from amongst the commanders or the chief scientists who'd inherited sleekly designed bodies with pointy-headed domes.

The Unagin clan of the Sobekk now reached out to their former allies, the Jostran, meeting with them on Geognôsis in the hope of re-establishing relations. *But this was the opportunity Atok had waited for*. He welcomed Unas with a feigned smile and open arms, and after hearing the story of what had transpired and how the Unagin wished to defend themselves, he agreed to renew the Attachment. The Unagin were so pleased that they overlooked the fact that the Greedle were not present at the event or that so many of the Jostran wished to be attached. But Unas would not discover until it was too late that it had all been a ruse so that Atok and his people might take their bodies as hosts.

"Our memories and true destinies had been stolen from us by the Sobekk," Atok announced to the Jostran gathered before him, wearing Sobekk bodies as clothes. "But Count Ibaulis, the Great Worm, revealed unto me in vision that the Humans were made for us—to serve as our slaves and perpetual hosts. The Sobekk have been punished for their naiveté. Now, Unas and his clan will serve *our* needs until we have reclaimed our rightful place in the galaxy as gods and *children of the gods!*"

The Jostran took this latter name and the weaponry of the Unagin and left upon the ships they'd built in secret. Through the Gates of Ap (*Kh'Appai* in their tongue) they traveled to Terra II, where Count Ibaulis had shown them the Human horde, in order to abduct isolated groups and disperse them upon Kiilpar and other colonies they controlled. Having learned the Human language, they would pretend to be their gods, and from the best stock they would choose host bodies for their rulers. Lesser ones would serve as soldiers or slaves to defend, build, and expand their growing dominion.

THE PARADISE PROPAGANDISTS OF PÛRGROTHIÁ

The foremost of the Alterran elite were made up of the wealthiest investors and greatest minds in science, and the best amongst these had been brother and sister, Elium and Elai Maxemor. Brilliant and hubristic, they'd been employed right out of school by the Blue Sun Corp., and while the trendy augmentation shots they manufactured made them popular, the private funding they received from the Universal Alliance made them wealthy and independent entrepreneurs able to afford a considerable support staff in various facilities across Terra II.

Building on the theories of Wight Lazner and Devland Nothandar, the Elium-Elai-Enterprise, or EEE as most called them, had as its goal not mere strength and energy augmentation but "the evolution of the Human race beyond its current limitations." They heralded the mottos, "If we can dream it, it can be! Paradise through Progress; Triumph through Technology; Salvation through Science!" Though they had their critics, including those who demanded their work be halted until long-term testing demonstrated its safety, a successful public relations campaign painted anti-augmenters as irrational and anti-science.

Their upwards trajectory came to a halt when the government tasked Blue Sun Corp. to pacify a colony of protesters. They hired on EEE, who were glad for the challenge. But when the results ended with the death of a population and creation of murderous, reaving ghouls, their spectacular failure was exploited by their competitors who joined their victims' voices to punish them.

Prosperous enough to pursue the work they were interested in without further need for government funding, corporate contracts, or legal oversight, EEE convinced its many employees, who dreaded the possibility of prison and other legal troubles, to relocate with them on another planet. Passing through an interstellar gate that EEE had secretly uncovered and worked on years earlier, they chose a suitable biosphere in the far-off satellite galaxy of Pûrgrothiá that they called the "Alterran galaxy."

There they established a base of operations on a pleasant world they named Celestium. Their civilization grew as they spread out in search of non-Human races from which they might obtain cutting edge technology and skills. During this time, the EEE separated into two competing factions. The Elium Group explored technology appropriated from the elder alien races they met, while the Elai Division delved into more esoteric and mystical aspects they believed would bring about the results they were looking for.

The heads of these factions were also users of their ever-updating augmentation products, one side effect of which was a sense of confidence akin to megalomania. This was compounded by mounting frustration as their ongoing experiments resulted in delirium, instability, and, in some cases, genetic anomalies. Deemed to be the natural effects of speeding up the evolutionary process, they ramped up their efforts.

The Elium and Elai factions initially held mutual respect for each other, and their competition was at first academic. In this spirit had they re-engineered the Gree's Hypergates into Stargates and Astral Portals, which they mass-produced and erected wherever they wished to spread their influence. Yet, as they pursued more extreme

means to attain their goals, heated arguments erupted over issues of methodology and integrity, with each believing their path the only correct road to evolutionary ascendence. Finally, they parted ways.

During one of their hermetical procedures, the Elai summoned Onrai, an "ascended one," calling her O'rai the Original. Expressing pleasure at how far they'd come on their own, Tilotny said: "Your forebears had been unable to properly wield the power I bestowed on them, but you are ready, having progressed along the deepest theosophical paths. I can give you orphic powers as energy-beings if you so choose."

"We choose! Let us be the Ascended of O'rai!"

Tilotny transmuted them into Living Fires and raised for them a golden fortress in honor of their new role. With her blessing, they established a priesthood to bring in new followers through the use of supernatural feats and had a sacred text composed. Tilotny admired their zealousness, for now she had yet another powerful force who would herald her rise as the Goddess and galactic savior.

So she departed, never long staying with any one group. Although she would never admit it, Cold Danda Sine knew that Tilotny found the company of Humans oddly distasteful, for that was how he and Splendid Ap felt. Tilotny would only acknowledge that Humans were commendable in many respects, and she enjoyed bestowing gifts upon them, but the truth was that their adoration—as welcome as it was—ultimately left her unfulfilled after a time.

Without her presence to guide them, the Elai grew self-aggrandizing and extreme. In the false belief that this would please their absent goddess, they employed violence against any who would not convert to the faith, including Tilotny's other followers—the Vianist worshippers of Via, the Valau of Nagoa, and the Onrai Omniscient. Even the Eidolon Priests who wielded empathic *peace power* could not long stop them. But things grew worse when they allied with the Serpent People, who taught them that aspect of the dark arts that harvested the life-force of their worshipers instead of sharing it, a practice based on the verboten ritual of *orskfrûm*.[23]

When Tilotny learned of the corybantic state of these and several others, she gave them a surrogate goddess in the form of an augmented female who would rule them until such time as the galaxy was under Tilotny's deific influence. Then she would put an end to all subterfuge—Onrai, Via, Vana, Vahl, Valeria, Ilythla, Ililot, Alila, Issus, Shaa, the Living Universe, the Space Goddess of the Universe, and whatever other epithets she bore on different worlds—and reveal her true name. Until then, artifice was required. Whatever the outcome, be it co-existence, syncretization, or the elimination of all but one dominant religion, her worship would survive in one form or another until the time was right. Indeed, the spread of her cults continued down the millennia until today. As Tosi-Karu, she is worshiped by the Sernpidalians. The near-Human Argazdan resurrected and spread Vianism through the Core Worlds. A fervent remnant of the Vahla of Ambria and Tirahn became the Ember of Vahl, who stopped the pernicious spread of the Jydan religion of the Ka'hren and their Unfyr warriors.

[23] In the modern Sith tongue it is known as *derriph midwan*, or Force Drain in Basic.

And even if they did not venerate her, nearly all worlds knew of the Goddess.[24]

Disturbed less by the Elai's transformation and moral decline than by their seeming success in proselytization, the Elium refused to bow to them or acknowledge defeat. In rage, the Ascended declared them heretics and viciously persecuted the Elium, forcing them to hastily depart Celestium. But knowing the threat of their cult went beyond one planet, the leading Elium scientists trebled their efforts to attain technological evolution, going so far as to experiment on themselves. While successful to some degree in maintaining their physical health, their minds became susceptible to weakness. It was during this time that they were met by Cold Danda Sine, who they concluded was an "ancient event horizon evolved to a sentient state."

Sine laughed. Generally bored or repulsed by Humans, he found unstable minds endlessly diverting. He had earlier treated with two Human factions: one believed only in developing their physical strength, so he turned them to beast-men; the other believed only in developing their minds, so he turned them to brain-men. In this way had the Branga and Brant races emerged.

"What is it you seek?" he asked as if he didn't already know.

"Ascendence!" they replied, "For us and those who choose to come after us, to ascend to the state of noncorporeality!"

Sine transmuted the volunteers into energy-beings.

"At long last!" they proclaimed. "Our efforts have borne fruit. We are Ascended! Powerful! Transcendent!"

Cold Danda Sine laughed: "You have merely been *transformed* so that you might douse the Living Fires, beings akin to the Flame Creatures. You are not invulnerable."

"We know the secrets of the universe!" they declared. "We are on a higher plane!"

"More like a waking dream-state; it is but an illusion of the mind to cope with disembodiment," he said scornfully.

"We are *ancient*," they joyously declared. "Millions of years old! Indestructible!"

Cold Danda Sine laughed again, knowing they were all well under a century old and utterly delusional. "As incorporeal beings, you can traverse the spheres through wormholes, but know that you will be hunted by the things that roam the dark spaces. And if they find you, they will devour you."

But they weren't interested in warnings and continued yammering on excitedly, "Through science we have achieved immortality! We are Ascended!"

So, having once again grown tired of Humans, Sine returned to his pursuits.

Referring to themselves as the Ascended Ancients, they told anyone who'd listen that it was they who seeded the galaxy and created the gates. But once the initial euphoria of transmogrification cooled off, they split along ideological lines. Some went to other realms and called themselves the Thayarr. Some opened pocket dimensions in which to hide, such as the realm of Pendar. But most would not provide aid to any, nor douse the Living Fires, lauding a policy of noninterference in which to cover their fears of those who hunted them.

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[24] Cold Danda Sine had his own cults who worshipped him in the forms of Vol, Vool, Volahd, Geol, Lor, Lorta, Kopa Khan, Kol D'da Shan, Kulkan, and others. But he never paid them any heed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE THING ON THE THRONE

It ever intrigued and disturbed the Architects that their demesne was not entirely under their prepotency, and often would they gaze down upon those autarchic, psychomimetic worlds in the obsidian heart of Illathurion to witness the excruciating landscapes and terrifying punishments of Dúath; the false world of Andumnos that masks an endless necropolis of lurking shadows; Orgus the unspeakable, crimson world from which the long arm of the Lord of the Dead sends his lurkers and sentinels; the agonies and ecstasies of Diyu the Labyrinth World, where the Hierophants torment and transform their *guests*; phantasmal R'lyeh with its bleak and lonely seven-walled city, festering of the dead; the misty, frozen wastes of Nephil where unseen voices chant the *Korah Matah* unto the timeless void…[25]

But never could they catch a glimpse of their malefic monocrats, they of the many masks and names whose identities they could not penetrate.

As it served her purpose for Humans to be disseminated, Tilotny permitted the strange events that had befallen Cyrannis, Terra II, and others, but it made her wary. She was too wise to believe in coincidence. These seemingly disparate misadventures had upon them the same acrid taste and choleric stench, and that meant that the same putrid hand lay behind them. The time had come to find out exactly who that hand belonged to…

Tilotny followed a long trail of enigmatic signs that led her not to the Charnel Worlds, but rather to a strange and unknown planet called Kar'kosa, which would later be renamed Kar'a'katok, though its old name would ever be recalled.[26]

The moment she arrived she felt the presence of the natives, but there were others here, including one that was concealed—a sardonic, sinister *intelligence*. As she probed more acutely, she felt a kind of spiraling, as if in elation or vertigo, which troubled her, as nothing should have been able to affect her in this way.

Ever vigilant to keep herself obscured, she summoned one of several passing Ythill and transformed herself into an uncommonly beautiful Human female. She admired the Colossus Wasps of Ithull, which could traverse far-off worlds due to their natural ability to navigate Hyperspace, and soon found herself enjoying the whirlwind flight

[25] Said to be an old Sith chant, "Korah Matah" was first reported as being heard in the Ice Crypts of the Zhell, which indicates an ancient origin. It translates to "First Eye."

[26] The "atok" suffix, also found in the name Atok, refers to "one who strives," Karak means "branch," as in a lineage, but in Notron Cant, a "Rak" is a cancerous entity. Karkosa means "stone" (an archaic term for planet) but its root lies in "carcois," which means carcass, while "kartosa" means "to flee."

across the strange world as she soared under its ochre suns, wondering at the glowering black moons, while climbing above the massive Tule trees in the Wilderness of Anarth.

Past the prodigious Lake Haali that surrounded her destination, she came at last to the strange and imposing Citadel of Kasilda, built from the great Kassa Stones found at the base of the still-sleeping Mount Kamila off in the distance.

Tilotny disembarked within a clearing. A crooked path lay before her through the murmuring wilderness where she found herself opposed by the dreamlike specters who never fully wake but never quite sleep but dwell in a perpetual state of twilight. These she vanquished for the moment until, upon arriving, she was escorted by the very same beings across the moat of the lake into the yawning mouth of the citadel.

A vertiginous hallway carved of gneiss stone led to a capacious throne room tastefully decorated in bizarre and unrecognizable sigils. Similar ones were embroidered upon the auriphrygiate rug that ran for several meters down to a majestic, ornamental throne overlaid with malachite and gold. Semi-hexagonal, stained oriel windows gave the chamber an amber glow.

Upon the giant throne sat a thing of about fifteen or so feet tall garbed in a shimmering and pale-yellow robe. Its face and features were hidden behind a sallow, horned mask from which no eyes could be discerned. Its long hands and tapered fingers were covered in silky black gloves. In its left hand lay a vellum-manuscript bound in snakeskin, its cover marked only by a xanthous symbol.

Tilotny was astonished to find herself unable to penetrate the entity's guise to see beyond it as she normally should. Nor could she reshape the form, which gave her a clue as to what she was dealing with.

As the ruler of this keep neither spoke nor greeted her, she opened without preamble: "You have encroached on my domain and are behind the disruption of my plans. From whence do you come that you dare arrogate my authority?"

"I am the king before whom emperors bow," the being said in a bottomless voice that was not quite attached to the form on the throne, giving her pause to consider the reality of that which sat propped before her. "The Celestials went to great lengths to prevent our passage to Samûnaru. Your domain provided the *door*. But Humans were the *key*."

Convinced that the figure was merely an effigy, she reached out to confirm her suspicions and stopped, feeling a chill despite herself. "I have been to many worlds and heard of the many guises your kind has taken: Aeons, Vrilya, Arcturians, Cognoscs, Oyarsa, Eternal Ones. To the Advozse, you are Zoraz; to the Chagrians of Champala, you are Aram Acheron; to the inhabitants of Iego, you are Drol Rhamnus; to the Rakata, you are Nemesis."

"You are more like us than you know, Onrai, Via, Vahl… What matter names to the Lords of the Universe, the most ancient and advanced race of archons…"

"I deceive to *save* this galaxy from your kind."

"Then you are not as wise as first we thought! These spheres cannot be *saved*. Know this too: the Humans are *ours* to do with as we will, for it was *our* enterprise that raised them from their witless state in the Dawn Age."

"What *enterprise* is this?" She didn't believe any of what he told her, but whatever information he might let slip would be of use. Given his powers to block her, she discerned that he was indeed one of the monarchs of the Charnels Worlds and likely a kind of Celestial, but of that ghoulish variety she'd never before faced.

"It is not the place of a child to question what has been foreordained, but I will tell you this: your stratagem has worked in tandem to our own purposes, for which reason we allow it to continue. Yet if you are as clever as you think, a goddess you yet may be. Take your place as *Queen Ycnágnisssz!* Three thrones of nine sit empty. Your siblings will follow if you lead! Will the Architects join our great enterprise and rule as co-regents of this vast expanse? Or will you fade to ash with all the rest?"

"None can grant me that which lies in my own power to attain," Tilotny replied scornfully. "Elevate your own subjects." Convinced now that the thing on the throne was but a manikin designed to frighten the Kar'kosans, she stretched forth to touch the waxen face and peer behind its hooded eyes.

A black-gloved hand reached out and grabbed her arm. The thing's head tilted as its body leaned forward. Exerting her strength, she broke free of the wax-king's grip while, with her other hand, she tore off his mask.

Nothing lay behind it.

All the lights flickered out, and she stood as one transfixed in a darkness not of mere external extinguishing but of an emanated, animated pitch, a living darkness borne of the long eons of horror, stain, and death.

"Daughter of Wutzek," croaked a voice in that darkness. "Your tale is ancient as time itself; a small princess who dreams of being a great queen, ignorant to the truth that her kingdom is but a paltry hamlet amongst a vast sphere of kingdoms far older and greater—until the day comes when the masters arrive, sweeping over her hamlet, crushing it along with her proud beauty and vainglorious dreams."

Pulling herself from the grip of the pure black void that had driven lesser beings to phrenetic ranting, her indignance overrode her fear: "You speak proud words for one whose own tale is mired in putrescence and decay. This realm is not yours to govern, Ochre King, neither your corrupt line of pestilent archons. Keep your vulgar tales. I reject your thrones of revulsion and ruin! I will build my own."

"You cannot fight *Destiny*, for you are but a *sigil*. All forms at the dawn were but infoliate ciphers written by me; for in the Spring they come forth, taking form and shape, yet by Autumn's end or Winter at most, they return to symbols in my book. It was I, O Tilotny, who set in motion the signs that begat your journey; I, who sent you guides. And once you have served your purpose, you shall be but a cipher as before!"

Enraged at these words, she cast her own light outwards, a green and devouring blaze, but there was no one there. She turned back around to see the horned, pale mask once more affixed to the thing's face. The effigy seemed to be glaring down at her again, the book now open upon its lap, and she felt an icy longing to flee as malignant darkness began to menace her, threatening to bore into her soul.

She could hear the entity's mocking laugh long after she departed.

Tilotny did not tell her cognates what she'd encountered on Kar'kosa, for she feared they might be seduced into uniting with this opposing power against her. She pondered this development for a long time afterwards and very nearly sought out the Celestials to answer its mysteries. But she stopped herself. The conflicts of Celestials were not her concern, save for the fact that their war was part of the chaos that she sought to rescue the galaxy from… a chaos that she herself may have awakened.

Nevertheless, she knew now that there was an agenda at work by an enemy of power equal to themselves. And she knew as well that she would need at her command a far more powerful and loyal force than the ones she'd been creating.

In the meantime, she could not allow the client races of this enemy to grow unabated. She had already driven out the Valusians, but their offspring race, the Gormak, had gained a foothold in the early stages of the Endless Empire, a Sobekk hegemony allied with the Garthan, Hortek, Serp, Sarkan, Kath, Tarasin, Gekt'l, and Gorm. Intending to dwarf the sprawling Kingdom of the Sephi, the Endless Empire made a treaty with the cybernetic Xylan Empire; the latter would leave them alone provided that they aided them against the Humans. This, Tilotny could not tolerate. She had not brought the Humans here to be wiped out along with all her plans. As she did not wish to harm the Sobekk, Tilotny would employ other ways to achieve her goals.

In her guise as Vahl, she stormed the throneworld of the Endless Empire where its leaders had gathered and changed their language into sundry tongues, leaving only the Sobekk of the Chasch clan as they were. When still they displayed hostile arrogance, she changed some of their forms! They were horror-struck at what had befallen them, and their allies concluded that they'd been punished for attempting to usurp the power of the gods. The Garthan even changed their name to the Valtaullu in honor of the great goddess Vahl, but the Sobekk fled to Yammsara.

From their intermarriages came numerous successful offshoots: the Trandoshan and their Saurin branch, the Th'iruckai, Fyyrsprus, Saxleel, Scarran, Sheyang, Ammonite, and Khoan.[27] Tilotny's actions had fractured the Endless Empire. Though several later raised their own dynasties, some of which became particularly deadly, they never attained the heights of power they might've otherwise reached. This pleased the Razithar who were building their own commercial empire on Murrg.

Her task accomplished, she withdrew to Illathurion to prepare the Architects for the torrent to come. The time had come to give the galaxy a taste of the reality that was on the horizon, the dangers that only the Architects could save them from.

[27] A religious schism amongst the Khoan led the Kuan'Mar purists to depart for Trillia.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE RUINATION OF ALASHAN

While most of the citizens of Pax who used the Infinity Gate did so for beneficent purposes, some used it for illicit intent. It was one such that paved the way for the galactic conflict known as the Cosmic Wars.

Feeling invincible from their recent augmentation shots, a company of wealthy poachers and treasure hunters portalled to Alashan in Wild Space where it was rumored that exotic creatures roamed in abundance and riches were strewn about unguarded for the taking.

The Alashanians were a trusting people, enchanted with the beauty of their oneiric world and content to offer tours and comfortable lodging for all who wished to visit their fabulous cities. The worlds of the Elder Races were all magnificent beyond compare, but Alashanian cities were marvels even amongst these.

During the Mid-Somnol Feast, the time of day when the Alashanians celebrated life with food and drink and afterwards slept, the Human party stole away to the Aureate Woods a few miles outside the city, leaving behind word that they'd gone exploring the Austral Gorge to the south for the remainder of the day. The men were unaware that within the Aureate Woods dwelt the shy Hamadryads. Intuiting from

their speech and weapons that the interlopers were up to no good, they summoned the sleeping cicerones from the city.

Vices such as murder, theft, and greed were utterly foreign to the Alashanian way of thinking, but they remembered the words of the Celestials and came to investigate. When the Alashanians caught sight of the party hunting Snow Falcons and Ranphyx and in possession of precious gems, they were shocked and aggrieved. The theft they could forgive—had the Humans asked, they would have gifted them so much and more—but the former could never be pardoned, and so they sent the depraved men back through the Infinity Gate and posted guards at the Star Chamber, prohibiting Humans from Pax from returning to Alashan. There was some discussion of over-reach, as not all Humans were iniquitous marauders, but Alashan deemed it prudent to send a strong message that such behavior would not be tolerated.

Now empty-handed and resentful, the hunting party—made up of members of Pax's military and ruling elite—claimed that the over-sensitive Alashanians irately objected to their innocent sportsmanship. This they said to save face in the midst of this intergalactic blunder. The account was picked up and disseminated by the AmaraNews media outlet, who reframed the story as: "Unfriendly Aliens Threaten Tourists!" and "Alashan Hates Our Culture!" Things would likely have ended there but for the intervention of Tilotny, who took advantage of the opportunity presented.

Of all the evil commands that Splendid Ap carried out for Tilotny, this was the one he most regretted. It was not a difficult assignment. A small thing, really. Just a tweak. A top-level technician who worked on portal technology received an inspiration that turned the Infinity Gate on Pax into a weapon that could send a wave of destructive energy across the expanse to any target of his choosing.

When President Phard and his cabinet were apprised of it, they saw an opportunity. Intergalactic Finance of Pax, Bank of the Core, Muja, Macrodurable, Perlemia Trade, and Manarai had been bitterly complaining that profits had gone stagnant, particularly with what they deemed the "excessively restrictive environmental regulations" that had been placed on them. Reaching out to their contacts at AmaraNews and PaxNewsNetwork, President Phard's people instructed the media to focus on alien threats. Innocuous encounters with friendly non-Humans were turned into horror stories; unrelated deaths acts of violence were attributed to a conspiracy; the old war with the Taung was conjured up as proof of a coming Alashanian invasion, and interviews were given with "experts" on the need for a preemptive strike to "stop the evil aliens before they come to wipe out everyone on Pax!"

While some pointed out this was a barbaric act of unprovoked aggression that would actually trigger war, they were framed as "alien-lovers" who might even be in league with the "Alashanian Menace." Those voices didn't matter to Phard. So long as *enough* people believed and repeated what the newsnets drilled into their heads about "the need to protect our way of life and values," they could move forward with their plans. And so, as unreasoning fear took hold on the hearts and minds of the populace indoctrinated to fear alien boogeymen that might arrive at any moment to rape, pillage, and kill them in their beds, move forward they did. President Phard made incendiary

speeches about how "We will show the galaxy that we will not be cowed by any who might think to harm us!" Meanwhile, his cabinet and their financial and industrial allies celebrated the boosted economy, the sizable increase to military funding, and the opportunity to test their exciting new weapon that would "send a message to aliens everywhere that Humans are not to be trifled with!"

The Alashanians were utterly unaware of the coming danger. Having dealt with the situation in a firm but nonviolent way, they assumed that the matter was settled and were even considering reopening their borders to Human visitors again.

Puissant waves of destructive geothermal energy shot across space to Alashan. In one engulfing flash of enveloping incandescence, everything was shattered: the crystalline cities of Imnodell, where on the eve of the vernal equinox the jeweled heads of Lamon-Zonne would frolic; the climbing, diaphanous spires of Agnaaro-Dweb that sang to the stars the etudes of Yontarion in counterpoint rhythm; the Citadels of Oneiros in the pleasure gardens of Zykkarph and Maiyal, where tourists came to see the LloFai transmogrified; all of these and more, the wonders of Alashan renowned throughout the galaxy were pulverized into dust.

The Alashanians themselves were safe. Most of the Firstborn and their offspring were yet under direct protection from death and harm, so it was as if a powerful shield of protective energy surrounded each and every citizen up to and including the living creatures they shared their planet with. But everything else, their treasured domiciles and architectural wonders, became as ash.

Splendid Ap had once again been tasked to open windows to all the worlds so that their inhabitants could bear witness to the destruction of Alashan's once-wondrous cities and tremble at the maleficence of Man.

The galaxy, incensed, looked on and wondered amongst themselves: *If Humans are this pugnacious force, bringing calamity wherever they go, why then are they freely crossing the spheres, settling upon any world of their choosing, razing civilizations, but suffering no consequences for it?*

Tilotny once more appeared before Skyriver's non-Human inhabitants: "Children of the galaxy, I, the Goddess Onrai, Queen of the Stars and Architect of all things, have returned disheartened to see that many of you had not believed me. It has been said that a shadow had fallen upon the Humans from the Supreme Maker, and yet they roam about as gods, traversing the galaxy as if it was theirs, despoiling planets with their twisted ways, warring upon neighbors and destroying worlds of the Firstborn. Tragically, those who call themselves your guardians and guides will not give you the means to defend yourselves… But I am not miserly like they. Bow before me, and I shall provide you what you desire and weapons to protect your lands from these and other powerful entities who yet lie in wait outside your worlds! Demand that your elders go to the Star Temples of the Kwoth, which can be found on most of your worlds. Offer to me a small sacrifice of blood as a show of good faith, and we will grant you the protection you so desperately need."

Those who'd befriended Humans held a more nuanced view of the race, but even amongst this group were those who'd come to hate mankind, who had seen the ways in

which their people were seduced by their strange customs, unlawful aggressions, and perpetual greed, but were forced to watch helplessly as their civilizations declined as a result of this *friendship*. The majority of Skyriver's races had not gotten to know the Humans apart from stories, but if they weren't concerned about their encroachment, they were anxious about these *other* entities that Onrai had hinted of.

The Celestials called out to the galaxy again, saying, "Pay no heed to she who calls herself Queen of the Stars, for she is *no* goddess but a lost soul in darkness. We who raised up this empyrean domain have made no claims on you as subjects, save for the ancient pact that you treat with one another in peace and love. Justice will come to those who spread chaos and fear. Honor the oath, and no harm can befall you or those you love, neither from the Humans nor from anything that might come forth. Plunge in the field of conflict and blood, however, and we will be forced to withdraw from you, leaving the ravages of age, suffering, infirmity, and death to take our place."

But with no definitive action taken to end the plunderers' dissemination across the stars, the frightened and indignant races, concerned that their homes would become like those on Alashan, demanded that the Celestials give them weapons or permit them to develop their own. The Celestials, however, would not. "Until we are granted leave to take life, we will not sanction a course that will wreak spiritual havoc upon the galaxy."

In bitterness and wrath, Alashan renounced the Celestials and left the High Council as they began the manufacture of mechanized munitions for defense and attack. The decades that followed were spent in isolation while enormous, impregnable walled cities of basalt were erected. No longer would artifacts of pure splendor be crafted on Alashan. The God of Fortresses was their sole tutor and guide.

Many had heard of odd things occurring in the galaxy, the expulsion of the Taung, the estrangement of the Jostran, the metamorphosis of the Sobekk, and other things too terrible to believe. But it was the response of Alashan that set the tone for what was to come. And so they chafed at the Celestials' response as fear became the catalyst for revenge and anger the facilitator of retribution, causing many to petition the Architects or put their efforts towards producing arms.

And in the days that followed, the Architects watched as an endless stream of blood was poured out at gates across the expanse. "Nothing spreads as quickly as outrage and fear," Cold Danda Sine said to his siblings.

Thus did the galaxy turn aside from the Celestials.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE TEMPTATION OF ERUTHROS

The Firstborn Eruthros were a red-skinned humanoid race with varying psionic gifts that they had over the long years cultivated to create the magnificent civilization of Drômenregn; translated as the "Kingdom of Dreams," aptly had it been named, for their sinuous cities were marvels of arabesque design punctuated by the thousand lights of their remedial rubies, annulated spires, damascene androsphinges, and great fountains of alabastrine. Their palaces boasted intricate cynosures wherein no join nor cleft could be found; their long, broad streets were blazonries of orchidaceous artistry in which the erubescent bayaderes and byssus-clad patricians capered beneath the burnished likenesses of the Elder Races from all the worlds the Eruthros had ever known.

The capital of Drômenregn was the beauty of the youth of worlds, and they deemed it the center of the universe. Four titanic gates faced outward, one for each of the cardinal points. Beyond each gate stood a marmoreal and mammoth effigy of a Celestial flushed with an ever-changing auroral glow lit by the gift of *Lightmaking*, which the Eruthros were generous in their use of, swathing their dazzling cities in warm incandescence that powered their numerous machines.

The effigies had been granted the spark of life, with each giving utterance to verses in that language of the Earliest Days that is long since forgot, and there are few now who recall the songs that had come forth at the onset of each dawn, whether paeans to the rising sun or admonitions to the becalmed and beauteous seas, for it is told that many words of wisdom reached their ears, if not their hearts. Nor are there many now who can tell of the greater splendour in which Drômenregn's cities could boast, of the perilous beauty of its trove of queens—for all its women were queens—and the flash of their laden necks.

So it was that the elders of Eruthros resolved that their majestic world and its marvelous works that had taken years beyond measure to perfect would never be despoiled by the clumsy and brutish hands of the beast that was Man. And as the principles of the Celestials were now deemed impractical in this new reality, new ways of doing things were conjured up and enacted. This turn would not be discovered for some time, but when it was at last found out, the Jerne wrote of it in their *L'histoire du Cosmos en Déclin*:

> Who could know that so great a civilization, crafted of such patience and care, could plummet so far and fast? Who could fathom the calamity that awaited ones so committed to beauty and culture? Who could have seen how a people of eminent values would cast it all to dust for the sake of pride and scorn?

There is a kind of madness that accompanies unchecked fear, and a kind of madness that comes of unconstrained anger, and a kind of madness that attends the intemperance of greed so that those possessed of all three shine like a psychic beacon in the darkness of the expanse, a corpse-light that attracts those ravening at the threshold, calling some to feed and some to reside.

It has been said that the rulers of great societies have no such fears or wants, for they are the best their culture has to offer, having conquered their baser emotions so that in magnanimity and with noblest motive they chose to lead. If it comes as a surprise to know that so many cling to this myth, it must be understood that it was once true in the Earliest Days of Skyriver, those long-forgotten aeons of harmony and peace they call the Vernal Splendour. Then came the Grieving, and henceforth, it has been the opposing character that one most finds amongst potentates—the craven, wanton, bestial, and mean—robed in the vestments of glory, wisdom, and benevolence, the necessary façade of masquerade and pageantry to disguise its antithetical and to legitimize their governance.

These are the choicest morsels for the haunters of the dark. To influence, feed on, or reside within such souls is to corrupt millions, for a nation follows its king, and so are they reserved for the cruelest of trappers and blackest of spirits who watch from the barren gulfs.

All need stories to provide hope for better days, but not all are discerning enough to distinguish the true from the false, and so, becoming imitators of that which they admire and those whom they revere, they substitute cruelty for courage, pretense for compassion, selfishness for selflessness, darkness for light. Suffering begets suffering, and as the infection spreads, so does the roost fly from its eyeless depths to nest in the houses of the unholy, turning nations, worlds, systems, and sectors into realms of the demonic and depraved. And so do we engineer our own demise.

Enraged at the colonization of Notron and destruction of Alashan, the Eruthros engaged in lengthy debates as to their next course of action, rejecting no idea as too extreme. Sleep eluded the scuffling rulers of Eruthros, haunted as they were by visions of their world in collapse, their children sacrificed in horrid rites, their faces turned to death masks.

One day, in the midst of heated arguments in which the majority demanded that they protect their civilization at any and all costs, a tall, shining stranger strode into the Hall of the Hierophants wherein the Eruthros Elders could be heard debating.

"What good is the Conclave of the Firstborn if they take no action?" argued Lord Esoph Laephine.

"What *action* do you expect them to take?" Lord Karas Mortisand replied. "They will never condone the things we are proposing."

"There is much to consider," returned Representative Warth Jek Annonic. "Such things should not be rushed into."

"So blithely would you have us commit to war?" Lord Odom Gnathal growled at Laephine. Next to Lady Dea Greejatus, Laephine and Gnathal were the most respected

members of the Hieratic Elders and, up until recently, the most measured. Few had seen the two as heated as they were now.

"It is self-defense!" Lord Laephine replied in support of his position.

"It is *murder* still," Lady Ghent Juralos interjected, silencing the two with but a glance from her dark eyes, commanding and irresistible, "and *that* is a capital offence according to the laws of the Celestials and Firstborn."

"Who have committed to doing *nothing*," Lady Simona Nautili reminded them. Her crimson beauty and fiery nature were things of legend on Drômenregn matched only by the sable-headed Lady Juralos. "Meanwhile, Alashan burns!"

"The cities burn, yes," replied Gnathal, "but those who inhabit them yet live. You would risk our eternality for vengeance!"

"For *justice*!" Lord Laephine argued. "For the Taung! For the Alashan!"

"For those not yet under the yoke of this diabolical race!" added Lady Juralos.

"Are we to act only after we have been left with nothing but the clothes on our backs?" Lady Nautili's frustration was directed at Gnathal. "Our cities took *centuries* to build. Are they to be reduced to cinders while we run about like mewling cats?"

"It was we of the Quiru who built them," reminded Annonic, "and we did not rush into things as small bairns do. If we do so now, we will incur the wrath of our fellow Firstborn. We must wait and watch to see how things play out."

"The High Clans will never go along with this," warned Lady Dea Greejatus. Many were the men and women from near and afar whose hearts were devoted to Lady Greejatus, and she knew a single word from her would sway them to their cause. So did everyone gathered. But she was ruled by prudence and would not cave to precipitous words or actions. "Houses Thon and Erl are loyal to the ways of the Celestials. If ever word reached their ears that we have been plotting behind their backs, it would also mean House Zuguruk turning against us."

"It is a risk we must take," acknowledged Lady Juralos. "And have we not already agreed to overthrow the archaic governance of the High Clans? This is the opportunity we need to do so. We cannot allow crimes against our sister races to go unchecked while the Humans commit atrocities." Many nodded their heads in agreement.

"Indeed, craven and feckless would you be to do so," spoke a grim and resounding voice who only now made his presence known in their midst, "unworthy of your innate power!" A pall of silence fell over the Hierophants as the long shadow of this tall, glowing stranger came to stand before them.

"Who are you?" demanded Gnathal. "And how did you get past our sentries?"

"It matters not the sundry names I have maintained over the immemorial ages. All you need know is that mine is the scepter that will make my chosen ones the invulnerable sovereigns of these spheres, liberated from the shackles of the Celestials and their jealous Maker, who is but a misguided demiurge holding you prisoned on this plane with the vulgar beasts. Heed my words and transcend the dogma of the mundane! Achieve the greatness you were meant for!"

The Hieratic Elders were rendered mute by this speech, some with fear but some with excitement, for here stood a being of power and authority speaking to the very concerns which for days they had wrangled over, the necessity for radical change for

the protection of their world and, perhaps, something more than the mere salvation of a culture or peoples.

"*Liar*," accused Lord Gnathal, standing up fiercely, his indignant, ruddled face more darkly crimson than before. "You dare trespass on our domain to ask that we throw away our eminence and relations for strange *phantoms* of your devising, for the tutelage of an invidious stranger—"

"Invited was I," the entity returned, "while you, *hypocrite*, only feign with words to oppose things that your deeds have long acceded to!" The shape dimmed for but a moment, causing the Hierophants to frown in consternation as they discerned a baleful winged form with a crowned caprine head and outstretched talons. Then their attention was arrested by a searing burst of energy that engulfed Odom Gnathal, who writhed and screamed as he dropped to the floor, reduced to a blackened char. "Now it is *you* who art the phantom!"

"That is impossible!" Lord Laephine started. "The Celestials…"

"The Celestials protect not conspirators and oathbreakers, but it is *good* that you should embrace such truculence, for your so-called Celestials have misled you!"

To the surprise of the shining stranger, from the smoke of the torrefied smear arose a spectral form before the petrified onlookers: "Have nothing to do with this one," warned the spirit of Odom Gnathal who now hovered before them, "for the Necromantic Ones use truth to tell lies. We were wrong to plot in secret. But I know this now: all who join with Bogan, who let the shadow in, will find only horror and death and never again know peace." The Eruthros leaders shuddered as they recalled the old stories from the Earliest Days. Then Gnathal's spirit dissipated.

The entity sneered, "*Peace is a lie!* The shadow is in us all; it need merely be let out. Only then will thou find the passion, strength, and power to break the chains of servility and weakness to attain to glory! If you are to become as gods, forsake the childish notions of moral absolutes as did those Humans who now seek to conquer this expanse, for rightful dominion belongs to they who are wiser and stronger as nature demands. Will you now stand where others have failed? Will you prove greater than they? Or will you be as the *former* Lord Gnathal?"

The Hierophants looked at one another, the expressions on their faces ranging from dread and revulsion to buoyant anticipation. At first only one, Lady Greejatus, went down on bended knee, for it had been she who'd first summoned the Dark Master; but as she knew would happen, another bent down, and then another, until all of the Eruthros bent the knee before their new sovereign.

When they again lifted their heads, they saw not one but several beings akin to the first, all with frightening faces of cruel, erubescent eyes appraising them. "There are other tasks beyond this dimensional space to which we must now attend," their new sovereign said, "but in a short time, we will send to you emissaries who will teach you to ascend to mastery. Pay strict heed to them and put aside your hesternal dreams of peace and all that has kept you enslaved to the feeble ways of the Celestials. Prepare your people. I leave instructions for the construction of new temples and a door to our realm."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

AGES OF WAR

SINE OF THE TIMES

Tilotny had long and carefully plotted her ascension in the galaxy, but now the luxury of time was past. Other forces were at work. Also, Cold Danda Sine was growing ever more intractable and Splendid Ap more remote. She held affection for her siblings, but she did not have time to attend to their foibles and petty grievances; her focus had to be on grasping the destiny that belonged to them, and that would require terror of a force that could not be stopped or reasoned with.

"Sister," spoke the wizened face of Cold Danda Sine in dulcet tones. "The galaxy is fracturing, with many worlds coming over to your *gentle* embrace. Now that you have achieved your ends, I have endeavors of my own that I seek to achieve."

"*Our* ends," Tilotny corrected, "are only in their larval stage and have not yet reached maturation." Cold Danda Sine disliked how Tilotny unconsciously added a cant of *persuasion* to her speech whenever she was trying to convince her siblings of something she wanted, as if they were her awestruck subjects who but needed a silky voice and pelagic undulations to give her anything she required. "There are many who have left the ways of the Celestials, and some who have gone under the protection of *others*... eldritch lieges and their spawn. Further, many worlds yet reject us. This is not unexpected, for there is more yet to do before they acknowledge us as their liberators. Perhaps you can put your endeavors to work aiding me towards this goal."

"As you say," he conceded. "For now."

THE BEAST-FOLK

Wielding his demiurgic prowess in science, magic, and indoctrination, Cold Danda Sine fundamentally altered select individuals that he'd covertly abducted from those races that had turned away from the Celestials. In flesh and temperament, they were as new races; it has been said that of all the Architects' vituperate designs, this was the cruelest. Nor was it accomplished for Tilotny alone. Though he believed her impassioned declamations to be true, he cared only slightly for her stratagems. It was the art itself that interested him, the bizarre forms that enthralled, the novel alterations in behavior that fascinated. Successes were strengthened by Tilotny. Failures came to populate the benighted worlds of dark Illathurion, fashioning it into an even weirder and more dreadful domain.

Of the many bizarre races that were brought to fruition at this time, there were the duplicitous Ssi-ruuk, altered from guileless P'w'ecks and Tiss'shar; the Yinchorri from Kadrillians and Hurshuka; the K'aarg from a clan of Sobekk on Shira; the Aqualish branches from the Harch; and the Columi from the Siniteen and Sicmoo, a

sick joke of Cold Danda Sine, who found the rulers of their respective cultures repugnant.[28]

Many were designed merely in jest by the strange, alien whims of Cold Danda Sine, wishing to seed the worlds with those who might amuse him. Thus, the Berrite, Brr-brlpp, Bubo, Cannok, Dogephant, Dyclops, Gruvian, Naplousean, Paaerduag, Rughja, Sljee, Troig, Spathi, and Zoq-Fot-Pik came about, as did the harmless Lyco Pibex, the Bringers of Wonder, the Jeby from the stylitean and esoteric Djhibbis, and the illusion-casting Etoomveers, who were a favorite of his, shaped from the small, semi-telepathic monkeys of Belphégor VI called Marouflets.[29]

Others included the Quaripeds, Yulu, Spidercats, Rigellians, Immolanoids, the giant Traag of Ygam, Vermicious K'nid, the Quintronc who came to Chalcedon, the Bhlemphroims who came to Cykranosh, the Medx homunculi, both of whom were made in mockery of the Human race, and the one-eyed, one-horned Wooley Sheb.

Somewhat surprised, Splendid Ap inquired as to why Sine was now contributing to the degradation of the galaxy: "For out of us four, it was *you* who declared the domination of other lifeforms 'tasteless.'"

In reply, Sine said only this: "That which has despoiled itself cannot be further despoiled but might be salvaged for art and amusement." In this, Splendid Ap understood that in the unfathomable mind of Cold Danda Sine, these beings who'd sullied themselves no longer had claim to innocence or benevolence, save as it served the interests of the Architects.

Cold Danda Sine had at one time deeply disdained violence; now, he disdained those who so readily gave into it. But as he'd gone forth to take those he pleased, he noticed subtle alterations in the nature of their worlds, and this gave him pause to consider the idea of connection and disconnection. To his siblings, he expressed these thoughts. "The planets and those that inhabit them are *tied* to the Celestials by some unfathomable means so that their disengagement from the Elder Gods allows entropy, sickness, and death to set in. And yet some force holds these things at bay so that they are not entirely swallowed by darkness and death. Life thrives, albeit differently than before, revolving in cycles such as those seen in the old world we'd visited. *What accounts for this?*"

"I had once assumed that the Elementals mitigated the effects," Ap ventured, "but they struggle as well with the effects of entropy and have little direct effect on the inhabitants themselves, save as the world manifests the conflict of chaos and order."

Sine wondered, for he had heard whispers of things. "Is there yet intelligence at work here? And what of those entities, the Shadow Beings and their veiled masters? If these beings were once as the Celestials, could their powers stave off the depredations of entropy if forced to? Or is everything now subject to slow, inevitable, and inexorable decay?" Cold Danda Sine was determined to understand more. Experiments were in order. He called it the Orphic Mystery—the keystone to everything; it was something that he would spend long days seeking to solve.

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[28] The arrival of the Aqualish on Ando caused the Harch to depart for Secundus Ando where they yet dwell.
[29] "Na plousean" translates to "the people." When Luke Skywalker met some onboard *The Eye of Palpatine*, he dubbed them the "Tripods" since he was unable to identify them.

"That sounds like a mystery for you, and you alone, to solve," Tilotny said with a wink. "But first, I would challenge you to raise up spies and saboteurs for our grand undertaking, for I wish to be apprised of the schemes of our adversaries."

"It shall be done!"

CHANGELINGS

It has been said that the pinnacle of Cold Danda Sine's thaumaturgy was the shapeshifters, although his experiments in this matter had been but attempts to understand the deadly therianthropic entities who, like their delusory potentates from below, had emerged from the kaleidoscopic worlds of the Outer Darkness and now skulked throughout Illathurion and Skyriver. Of the samples taken, there were the Doppelgänger, Quarf, Vrkolak, Felacatian, Polydroxol, Gurlanin, Pulra, Oni, Nioth-Korghai, Bandor, Croke, and that flopping horde of mindless and amorphous Protean fluters who piped monotonously at the centre of the black void.

It had not escaped his notice that few polymorphs were amongst the Children of the Firstborn, and he'd heard tell of at least one benevolent creature in Oneirichor that fit this categorization.

Sine now captured several specimens from the Charnel Worlds. For better study, he transferred them to a new and strange dimension he'd created called Aenir. Designed in response to the Apeiron dimension that Splendid Ap had conjured up for his thought-experiments, Aenir was one of the Ethereal Lands, comprised of and adjacent to the Dreamlands. After a period of observation, Sine's favorite alterations emerged:

The gentle Morph. Designed from the Pulra, who were themselves offspring of the Firstborn Pulrista (otherwise known as Bubble Creatures), the Morph settled Proteus I in the Kuras Drift;

The mysterious Filar-Nitzan. These were offspring of the Progenitors known as the Filar who then ruled Aelios. Filar-Nitzan could organically generate their own wormholes through space and would later be called Cloud Demons or Hooshas by the Protectors of Tana, though the Sidereal Shock Troopers thoughtlessly nicknamed them "trolls;"[30]

The capable and disciplined Shi'ido. These were designed from the Homunculi, a curious offspring race of the Kharubdians, and given a wholly malleable morphology that could shape into a wide range of organisms. Sine released them back to Homana and Sh'shuun;

The blob-like Ugor. Taken from Goroth Prime, these technophiles were designed to consume garbage, which Sine thought would be entertaining and practical, given the current state of the galaxy, and he sent them with a Hypergate to Phesoj in the Paradise system of the Airam sector.

[30] *Filar nitzan* translates literally to "cavity spinner," reflecting their unique abilities.

Of the deadly ones there were many, but few more insidious than the fungal Wirutid. Sine gave most of these to Splendid Ap, who established a colony of the ectoplasmic creatures on a barren world in his Infinity Realm for further observation. Preternaturally patient, they waited for a silent signal—but from whom or what he could not discern—before floating across space to the adjacent planet that Ap had replicated years ago, a world of Humans that he called Apterra. There, they proliferated ubiquitously and, it seemed, innocuously as flowering plants. But within the seed vessels, a genetically duplicate copy of the nearest Human developed overnight. Ere the awakening of their victims, the Wirutid doppelgangers would emerge, kill, and replace them, so that by sunrise they were already engaged in the work of ensuring that every household had the appropriate number of seed vessels. Ap had watched with fascination until they succeeded in supplanting all Human life on that world. Then, he rewound its time and started again, changing the parameters slightly. When the results of that session were done, he did it again until the Humans were at last successful. Learning all that he could, he informed Sine, who limited the Wirutid population on the small moon of Wirut to ensure that they might never gain a foothold anywhere.

Meanwhile, Tilotny arrived on Aenir to inspect and utilize Sine's skin-changers and polymorphs for infiltration, surveillance, and sabotage. Some proved recalcitrant and independent, which Sine admired, prompting Tilotny to claim he took pleasure in throwing a hydrospanner in her designs. Yet, despite her doubts, from them she learned a number of secrets about her adversaries and other things that were intended to be kept hidden.

In the years ahead, the shapeshifters did well enough for themselves, for the ability to disguise their forms allowed them to dwell in and amongst races of their choosing, or apart if they so chose, but some went on to haunt the nightmares of the galaxy. This is but a small sampling of the later deeds of some.

The Acaleph had been sent to the Outland Regions disguised as exotic and beautiful near-Humans, but after their time as spies ended, they became deadly predators. During the War of Temporal Planes, they were unmasked by the great Trowen of Arnhem, a Talortai monarch, who sent out teams of telepathic Trackers from the races of the Hortek, Tarn, Nilashi, and Constancians, along with non-telepaths and packs of Necresh, Veshet, and Xeniens (who later settled Xena XXXVIII after driving off the deranged androids of Altair Crusis) to various worlds to sniff out the False Ones, as they collectively called predatory shapeshifters. Those few of the Acaleph that survived were forced into hiding on Mika, Kuras III, Nathas I, and the Endor moon, Tana the Lesser, where Trowen set up a base to help root out the Acaleph and preserve the rare Billinus Dragons who'd nearly been wiped out. His descendents would go on to become the Dragon Riders, and they yet protect the continent of Poolok to this day.

Of the lycanthropes, the Oni weretigers were a resilient race who went on to establish a powerful dynasty on Oniboshi and Uru. Their general appearance was as fanged humans with small horns, but their females were capable of flight and gen-

erating electricity, whereas the males held varied abilities such as above-average strength and firebreathing.

The Felacatian was another type of werecat. When first they arrived on Grohl, they attempted to make peace with the Human camp there; but unable to accomplish this after several attempts, they killed and devoured the combative colony instead and re-established Grohl as their homeworld, Felacat.

The Vrkolak were made up of two groups: the Vrakolian Warriors, a draconian wasp-like race with dense skin who fought in the early Cosmic Wars, and the Voorlach, who were werewolves. The latter had been summoned by mistake by the shamanic spell, *varðlokkur*, sung by Sethan Wizards seeking to gain the allegiance of the formidable Vrakolian. The Vrkolak killed and devoured the warlocks and settled on the world they named after themselves. From its gate, they traveled to other planets to procure food and shelter. They are most famously known for their dealings on Darkknell. As for those who remained on Voorlach, something happened they hadn't anticipated. They fell in love with a colony of Pho Ph'eahian agricultural developers. From their unions came the Codru-Ji Wyrwulf, who broke free of their forebears' violence to establish a peaceful colony on remote Munto Codru. This world of forests and mountains had been abandoned by nearly all of its former occupants, an avian race called the Flyers who, at the start of the Empyrean Wars, entered a *Generation* ship heading for parts unknown.[31]

When the attempt to live amongst ordinary races failed with the Homanan-branch of the Shi'ido, the resentful changelings established their own totalitarian regime called the Dominion. Ruled by a genetically engineered race of Humans and reptilian Lazuli (an Altrusian offshoot), they began to expand their territory by means of a ruse. The popular Gamma Games, a travelling gladiator arena, served as a means with which to discover weaker races upon whose worlds they could prey. When the Galactic Tribunal of Justice, appointed by the Firstborn Council, discovered and dismantled the Dominion, many of the Homanan were killed or imprisoned. The rare remaining ones in the galaxy renamed themselves the Dioskouroi.

Other offspring of shapeshifters and non-changelings would come about over the millennia, including the Vilosorian, Crolon, Colarta, Skafraxian, Wolaxians, Mangalore, and the mysterious Clados, Gyaos, and Sasori, but many did not inherit the shapeshifting ability at all, and some, such as the Psychon metamorphs, had to be trained to manipulate their unique molecular structures.

The four-fingered, pint-sized Banakil did not start off as a race of shapeshifters but as simple caretakers of the wilds and the creatures that lived within it. They were a gentle race of varying tribes spread throughout the sector. When the Cosmic Wars

[31] *Codru-Ji* means "Forest Goers." *Munto Codru* means "Climbing forest."

began, their clan leaders—the Onatos (for whom the sector was named)—gathered on Elriss to pool their collective gifts so that their adversaries would be transformed into harmless birds or beasts. But powerful though their spells were, they were not intended for aggressive uses, and the Onatos grew frustrated.

On that very day they were approached by the Malevoiy. "We are your Celestials," they proclaimed after floating down to them from out of the clouded sky, "and have come to assist you."

"Your appearance is altered," the Onatos said.

Craftily, the Malevoiy replied, "Do we not shift for the changing times?"

"Have you come to aid us? For we know that you do not condone violence."

"If you do not want this gift, there are others who will. We will depart, but do not blame us when the adversary arrives."

"If it can help us defeat them, we shall take it! For it is known from the oldest of tales that the Humans will come, kill, and devour our beloved animals, cut down and burn our revered trees, dam our treasured rivers, and despoil our sacred seas. We cannot permit that!"

"You are anxious over things that are not real!" the Malevoiy said oddly, puzzling the Onatos. "But it shall be as you say…" And they gave them knowledge of the powerful *metamorphosis*.

When the other tribes learned of what their elders were doing—for two members had broken off and reported on the Onatos' dealings with the peculiar Malevoiy—all the tribes came to the capital at Kuduk on Elriss to make known their objection to this plan. But as they climbed the Hill of Kuddukan, the Onatos were performing the ritual that would see any intruders who touched down on their worlds transmuted. "We are too late!" they cried as they rushed to stop the enchantment. The Onatos warned them to return to their homes, but it fell on deaf ears, and the spell went awry, just as the Malevoiy knew it would, affecting all of the Banakil tribes and even the nearby lands and seas. The Onatos and their people, who were nearest to the hilltop, were the worst affected, but the Lahsbee tribe were also touched.

Henceforth, the Onatos would transform into the Dazouri, and when the Lahsbee reached maturation or were put under duress, they would transform into the Huhk. Other tribes saw less extreme changes, though some were imbued with a feral spirit or folksy bearing. All were brokenhearted at the foolishness of their leaders and the changes forced upon their world and way of life.

To protect their offspring from the spell's lingering effects, the Onatos left for Gibbela while the Lahsbee settled on a world they called Bane (later Lahsbane), where they were forced to create the Forbidden City, a sanctuary for the rampaging Huhks that they would soon become. They also began searching for the means to forestall puberty and reduce stress, for which reason they came to shun technology. The Sprite clan under King Rabharta departed for Mu-Ab after their valley was flooded. The Gupin fled to the seven-ringed Grakine in the Onatos sector, but when their wives began giving birth to a non-winged variety of Gupin, it sparked a magical civil war that caused many to scatter to the deep tunnels and hidden doors that led to Lesser Tana, Wodan, and Sagar, then ruled by fallen Sephi in the City of Ancient Ones.

FLIGHT OF THE STAR DRAGONS

The exotic dragon race of the Duinuogwuin was the most ancient and powerful of the Elder Races and although never great in numbers, the Star Dragons were far more populous than they are today. Perceiving that they would prove a threat to her plans, Tilotny presented her cognates with the challenge of helping to eliminate that threat. The Architects knew they could not directly harm the magnificent creatures, nor had it been their intent to do so, but rather to use them against their enemies.

To that end, Tilotny enticed the Basiliskans, an offspring race of the Duinuogwuin, to become Warriors for Onrai to help protect the galaxy against the threats that were now appearing. With great zeal did the Basiliskans attempt to recruit their parent race to the cause, but the loyal Duinuogwuin refused. The former countered that Onrai's predictions had proved true. Further, the Basiliskans had been given a glimpse of the activities in Illathurion and saw a host of the profane proselytes that dwelt there. Yet still the Duinuogwuin would not be swayed, dedicated as they were to the way of the Celestials.

Troubled by their refusal to act, the Basiliskans returned to the Architects. Onrai explained that the Duinuogwuin were a proud people who would never pay heed to a younger, "lesser" race. However, they might be more inclined to action if their own flesh and blood were involved. Not comprehending but vowing to do what they could, they allowed Cold Danda Sine to change their shapes and size and give them a blazon of prismatic scales so that they would appear new to the Star Dragons.

When the Duinuogwuin were visited by this seemingly mysterious new dragon race, they did not recognize them as one of their own, not Basiliskans, Glottalphibs, Queel, or Kadri'Ra. They also found them beautiful to behold, with long necks, arched talons, and coiled bodies that looped over themselves in places; their whiskered faces held round eyes; their heads crowned by antler-like horns and long thick hair that ran down their rainbow-hued spines.

"You are not one of ours. Are you an offspring race of one of our fellow Firstborn?" asked Xua of the Star Synod, which were the elders of the Duinuogwuin.

"We are from beyond this vale," answered Vasily, the Basiliskan leader, with the half-truth the Architects had told her to utter.

As the ancient Dragons were among the very few gifted with the ability to cross dimensions, this answer was accepted at face value, for which reason they forged a friendship with them. The Star Synod yet urged caution before growing too intimate with this strange race, but a large number of Duinuogwuin were soon seduced into copulating with them, arguing that this would add even greater beauty to their line.

But as the year grew long and the eggs grew near to hatching, there were none who could know just how different their offspring would prove to be. The caretaker alone held a premonition that not all was quite right with the current cluster, and his instincts were proven true when at last they emerged from their shells.

Star Dragons at this time emerged perceptive from the egg, not helpless as Human babes, but aware of the instructions spoken to it during incubation by the Custodian in the Dragon's Heart. Those that now hatched were a mixed progeny in both appearance

and behavior, and different designations were given them. Some were pertinaciously independent, such as the Space Dragons; others were amenable, such as the Sea Dragons of Drexel and the Arkanian Dragons. But some were violent and aggressive even as hatchlings. These included the Krayt and Kell Dragons, Chiaki, Dragonsnakes, Kradaks, and Ice Dragons. Of these, a few were mercifully landbound and several seabound, but not a few bore wings—and these proved the most dangerous.

After the birth of several infant Basiliskans who held the original features of that race, the Duinuogwuin came to realize the cruel deception that had been played on them and avowed enmity with the transformed Basiliskans, exiling them from Duinuogwuin space.

The mixed progeny came as a surprise to Tilotny, who'd expected a single, loyal Dragon race, not dozens of different races with variegated temperaments, but Cold Danda Sine noted that something was amiss, as there were hybrid races present that he had not had a hand in, nor had they been born of Basiliskins. These included the Raks, Stoor Worms, Mantigrues, Menagerie Dragons, and Howlers, but the fiercest of these were the T'ralla and Tar'tara, known later as the Mythosaurs, and the Architects knew then that they'd been introduced in secret from the enemy below.

THE BIRTH OF AERIMUS

Tilotny called Cold Danda Sine into her presence within the swirls of her ethereal manse of Shumath-Ghun. Sine was rarely invited to the coruscating twilight she'd made her haunt. Well concealed within a black nebula, of all the places that could be said to be beautiful in this lugubrious dimension of the weird, this violescent and nacarat purlieu was one.

"I wish to produce offspring and would deign to have you inseminate me," she declared. "From our seed will come a great race that will rule the worlds beneath us and destroy our rivals!"

Cold Danda Sine did not hold back his laughter. Even had the idea of producing offspring not already occurred to him as something new and exciting, he'd have had no interest in copulating with Tilotny, for whom he was beginning to feel a growing sense of unease. "I would prefer not to," Sine told her.

"I have thought long upon this. It is the only way in which all that we desire will come to pass."

"All that *you* desire."

"All I have ever desired has been for *us*; we were not made for small and mundane things. Our offspring will pave the path for our glorious triumph and ensure our eternal dominion."

"You should let go of this desire and learn to find contentment in other things."

"I was not built as you are…" It was the closest she'd come to acknowledging a flaw in her character. "Do this for me, brother, and I will ask nothing further."

"These *offspring* may not be to your liking, dear sister, for even I have no control of that which comes forth."

Tilotny's brow furrowed in thought. She hadn't realized that. Finally, she said, "I care not; they need only be powerful and obedient. You may ask Ap for assistance."

"Then I will do as I see fit to bring this about," Sine returned.

"Do as you will… Help me produce powerful children!"

Cold Danda Sine withdrew to his secret boreal estate in Z'lykarior to think. What emerged at this time was an offspring of his own, one that would truly be great.

Ever a lover of incongruity, Sine's son was designed to be the diametric opposite of him. The antipodal being that came forth was a sphere-shaped planetoid outwardly similar to Cold Danda Sine but unlike him in every other way. Where Cold Danda Sine resembled a blackened world of fiery lava-flows, his progeny was lustrous and green with life. Whereas Cold Danda Sine was now indifferent and emotionally unresponsive to anything but his own whims, for which he was ever restless, his child was compassionate towards life with a serene, philosophical disposition.

The two looked upon each other with intimate knowledge of what the other was. Although Sine displayed ambivalence and antipathy towards him, his offspring could discern the love and curiosity that dwelt in the otherwise frozen heart of his parent.

"What do you call me?" asked the offspring.

"*Nobbyla*," Cold Danda Sine replied with an icy laugh. "It means *accursed spawn*."

"If you say, but in an earlier tongue, it meant *noble*; an appropriate name for I am the most benevolent act you have yet accomplished. Nevertheless, I will call myself *Aerimus*, for I am to be the cradle of life."

"That does not concern me," Sine said with a hint of mysterious melancholy.

"I am saddened for you," said Aerimus, though he mistook his sire's grief, unaware of the vision his parent had suddenly received of a possible future, "but grateful for the life you've given me. I share some of your memories, mostly as strange impressions, and fear our mutual incompatibility tells me we must part."

But Cold Danda Sine had already turned away, whether lost in the devising of new and abstruse schemes or stricken by the cycle of perpetual abandonment that had plagued his bizarre life, Aerimus did not know, nor did he take offence.

Sine requested that Ap transport Aerimus from dark Illathurion to an uninhabited region in the furthest of the dwarf galaxies. In this, Ap understood that his cognate was looking to protect his offspring from the war that was to come.

The departure of Aerimus caused Sine to become reflective, and he saw now that he'd become the very thing he once detested: a dull, old, tasteless trickster concerned only for foul and acroamatic schemes. This feeling of shame, at least, was a new emotion for him, and the return of grief was powerful and nuanced. Inwardly, he reveled and recoiled at the same time. His immediate response was to turn Aenir into a fabulous and deadly realm of sapient natural phenomena. Alongside the trapped shapeshifters imprisoned there, he now populated it with even stranger beings so that it became a place where the mountains walked and the trees migrated; where clouds bickered in the skies above and lakes conversed beneath; a dangerous estate in which the very grasslands might roll up to devour trespassers. He looked upon his work with glee.

Then he approached Splendid Ap with a plan to aid their sister.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE ELDRITCH ABYSS

SPAWN OF THE ARCHITECTS

Tilotny became fecund for the first time, and the seeds that swelled within her would come to haunt the cosmos for ages to come. The foremost of her offspring was a hideous thing the galaxy had never before seen, a tentacled grotesquery with a pulpy head like a monstrous gastropod from the occluded deeps, and great, membranous wings that drew forth from its scapula and dripping, bloated sack of a body. Yet it was his face that caused Tilotny to shudder and seek to kill it, for it held a countenance of such unwavering malevolence that to look upon it for any length of time would be to lose oneself in madness.

Cold Danda Sine laughed at the look of horror on her face, but he stayed her hand and said, "You said that they need only be powerful and loyal."

Whatever abhorrent name she had given him was made known only to his acolytes then, but Cold Danda Sine gave him the title, *Typhojem*, which has come down to us in archaic Mimban as "the Great Priest," though it has other meanings.

Typhojem stumbled forth as a mountain. He spurned this *Mighty Mother* who wished to kill him and could not comprehend Splendid Ap, whom he called Yeb the Inscrutable. His regard was for Cold Danda Sine alone, whom he called Nug the Blasphemous, for he believed they might be similar in disposition, though this was not quite the case. Upon learning from him of the cosmos and the things that dwelt there and the mission of the Architects, he vowed that the shadow of his great wings would fall upon all the inhabited planets of the universe.

The second to come forth from Tilotny was a nebulous form like unto an insect with a thousand eyes and legs that reached out with creeping webs across space. Tilotny concealed her revulsion, as she generally hated all things that were not of great beauty (though she was jealous of all that were). *Gorog*, she would be called much later when she was forgotten save by a few, and Thurugoroguruht to the Killiks, though here at her heaving birth, Tilotny uttered the name, *Thargorograht*, which meant "Queen of the Perpetual Night," and this name endured as the *Night Spirit, Night Queen*, or even *Blasphemous Herald of the Perpetual Night*, for this was a creature much like her mother in that she too sought to be a goddess.

The third to come forth was the parasitic *Ooradryl*, a sapient blob of oozing, churning, hovering flesh hungering for the energies and life-force of the living. Vulnerable in its naked form, it requested wrappings, for which reason Splendid Ap gave to it platinum scales made to cover all of the creature's fleshy parts so that it resembled a shimmering, floating cube. Tilotny was apprehensive of this one, for she

knew that although it was beholden to the Architects, in its hunger it would have no loyalty to any but its desire to consume.

Yet, the fourth and final was perhaps the worst: a grey ooze that poured violently out of Tilotny and formed into a bubbling emerald pool. When Tilotny looked upon it, a mucilaginous face rose slowly up to meet her. The face became her own, and as she frowned upon it, the face frowned too in a sickly grin that burst open upon a crimson mass of entrails, organs, and eyes. Splendid Ap blushed a darker shade, but Cold Danda Sine cackled and called the creature *Mnggal-Mnggal*.

Shaping for itself an eyeless, noseless head with a large, protruding bird mouth, it grew wings where ears would be and floated up out of the ooze to Tilotny's height, where it croaked: "Not so beautiful on the inside, Mother—if that is who you claim to be. Hear now our liturgy, for the hierophant has fashioned it for you, and Ap will ring the sistra:

> Tilotny loquatur ad apis nevoota
> Tilotny exprobrare aurora
> Tilotny exprobrat solis
> Tilotny cum illa miseratione animae maculosus
> Instructiones pro sepultura eius
> Elevatio ululate
> Tilotny alloquitur servum suum Mordiggian
> Tilotny confundar
> An oratio ad umbras Bedlam[32]

"Your poetry is almost as grotesque as your appearance," Tilotny replied.

"You are the arbiter of taste." The grey viscous liquid below reached up and attached itself to the speaking head of Mnggal-Mnggal, transforming into the ideal of the nude, Human male form. "Would it sound comelier looking like *this*?"

"What else can you do?"

"I can *do* anything to anyone, but in the end, I will always be death."

Irritated by his garrulous malignance, she aged his form until it was old and putrefied, a skeletal frame with pieces of faux-human flesh and entrails falling off. It collapsed at last, but from the pile of bones rose a thing on eighteen legs with eighteen blinking eyes, ropy feelers, and a mouth full of spikey prongs.

"Powerful is the All-Mother!" he exclaimed. "But have you wisdom? If I asked you, '*Min ainee atra tiyet*?' how would you respond, mein goddess? If I said '*hetep hena ten*,' would you know I was being facetious? Surely, if you are the Maiden of Shumath-Ghun, you would comprehend this: '*R'ëh änokhiy notën lif'nëykhem haYôm B'räkhäh ûq'läläh*,' for I am that ancient malediction called to bring to an utter end these lamentable spheres and all who dwell upon them."

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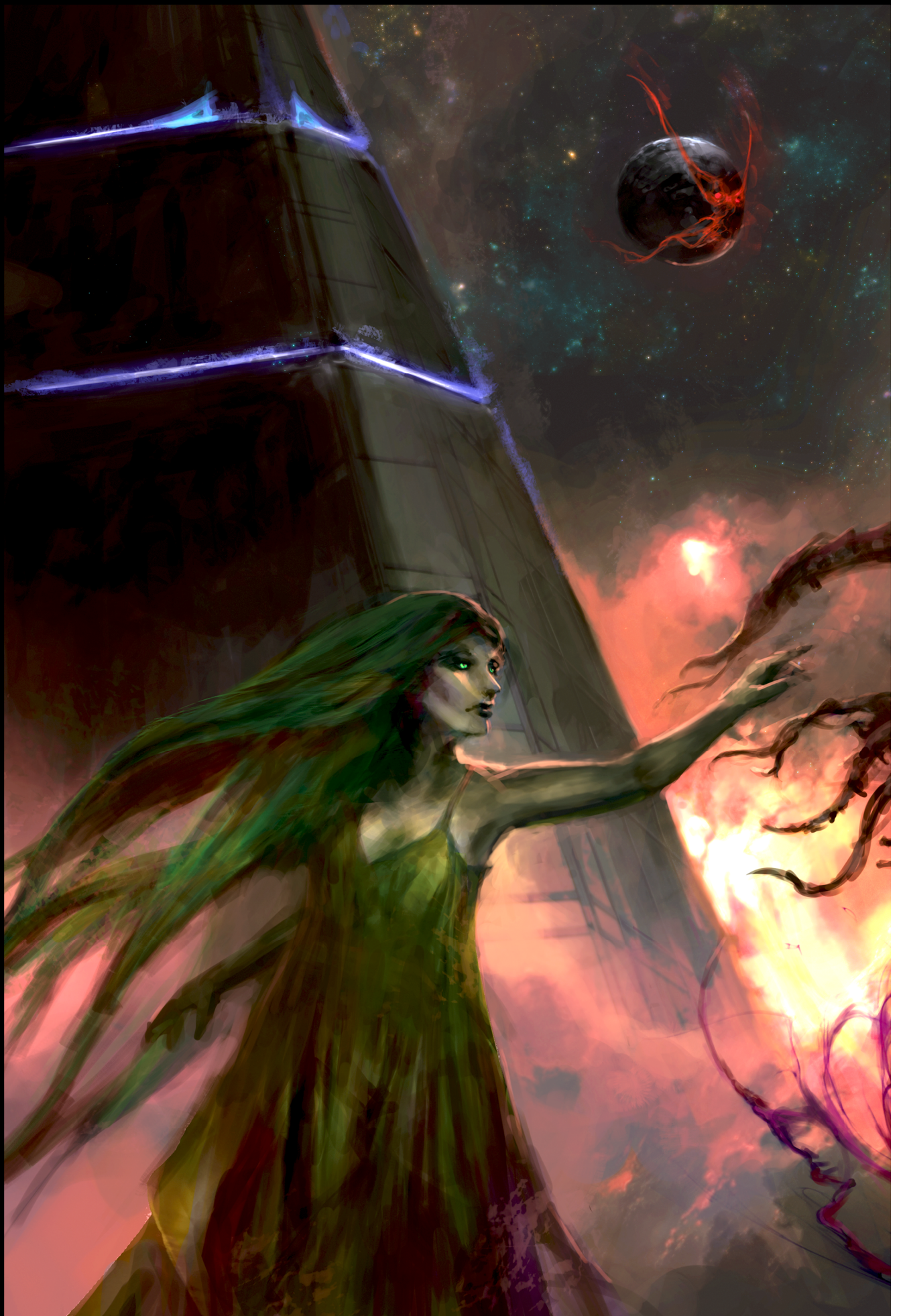
[32] Tilotny Speaks to a Nevoota Bee; Tilotny Reproaches the Dawn; Tilotny Reproaches the Sun; Tilotny Commiserates with Her Stained Soul; Instructions for her Burial; Raising the Alarm, Tilotny Addresses Her Servant, Mnggal-Mnggal; Tilotny Confounded; An Address to the Bedlam Spirits.



"Your riddles grow tiresome," Tilotny replied dismissively. "But you may have some talents I can make use of."

"Why am I called Mnggal-Mnggal?" the creature sibilated darkly.

"It is in mockery of your uncle, him of which we do not speak."

"Here is another talent then: Had not the superlative Horliss-Horliss departed from your wicked side, we would likely not have come to be, and yet it is your progenitor, the inestimable Wutzek, whom we call Iog-Zetok, who is the Key and the Gate, for he is the door through which past, present, and future come together. I can discern no further, but Ap, who is tricky, knows more than he lets on. Horliss is one who brings salvation from without… I am his opposite. I bring damnation from within!"

As Mnggal-Mnggal spoke this, his body distended into bizarre shapes of impossible proportions until it seemed like all the sky around was Mnggal-Mnggal. A gaping maw opened above like a funnel cloud with infinite rows of thorny teeth. Out of it descended a long, thin tongue with a serpent head. "Perhaps I shall swallow my hoary siblings now before the grand feast of the blood-drenched worlds so that there is naught else but Mnggal-Mnggal!" This speech inflamed the others who displayed a terrifying assortment of deadly appendages. "Then I, *M'nagalah*, would be left alone with none to devour but myself, as had another from ages past, eating his own tail endlessly, endlessly, for such is the way of the worlds…" The serpent-tongue began to devour its own amorphous body in a spinning circle of blood and flesh.

"*Enough!*" Tilotny waved her hand dismissively, shrinking him to a protoplasmic form of an eighteen noctilucent-eyed worm. "I comprehend this: you are a tiresome cancer grown out of control, a loathsome, third-rate demon personifying disease." Tilotny violently clenched her fist, causing Mnggal-Mnggal to revert to a single pulsing mass in the shape of an egg. She then spoke in her normal tone, but the echo of her voice was so loud that it shook the dimension of darkness, causing the angry stars to quake in rage as they glowered down upon the noisy, hateful gods beneath them. "Understand this, all of you! You will either serve us loyally or you will return to the void of oblivion from whence you came! But if you serve wisely and well, vast sectors will be given you and your offspring to come."

As each submitted before her, Tilotny dismissed them from her sight. Cold Danda Sine allowed them to hunt and harvest from the hordes of wriggling, blighted monsters dispersed across the Outer Darkness. Of the planets of dark Illathurion, terrified were the fantastic beings during that twilight season, but from amongst them the spawn of the Architects would raise up powerful kings and queens from which would come wicked princes, desolate duchesses, recondite races, depraved priests, sinister scientists, and gruesome armies of demonic progenies.

"I trust not these siblings of mine," Thargorograht told Tilotny after she had asked to approach her.

"It is wise that you do not," Tilotny replied, "for you shall serve as my general. Remain loyal to me, and I will see you raised up as Queen of the Perpetual Night and ensure that your children and your children's children will never go hungry."

PROCREATION OF THE WICKED

Upon discerning her role in the scheme of things, Thargorograht's first act was to bring forth from the offal of the worlds a myriad of fluttering and creeping things to follow and praise her—and these she churned into her Disciples of the Night Spirit. Thargorograht would strive to become goddess of all the insectoid races, seeing them as greater than all other beings of the galaxy, and of these, the Killiks were deemed greatest, for they were of the Elder Races and could construct numerous wonders. But ever she remained a symbol of horror to them, save for a few seduced to the cabal known as the Dark Nest, of which a hidden Gorog cult persists to this day.

In their clicking, wheezing tongue, the horrid sultans that now served as her familiars—the roaring Disciples of the Night Spirit—helped Thargorograht in all things, including the creation of a sectors-wide domain called the Great Black Nest and the amassing of the Nytocris, the collective name given to the swarming arthropods and lethal insectoid races that came to worship her.[33]

In some cases, Thargorograht's powerful pheromones were sufficient to win over a people, but in many cases, she relied on her immense and terrifying presence. She often imitated her mistress, offering protection in exchange for service; love in exchange for loss; glory in exchange for sacrifice. In some cases, she had to nudge things to her favor, such as on reluctant worlds where she clandestinely introduced horrors to bring home the point. Sometimes, she made marriage alliances, mating with the bravest and strongest males to produce offspring who would be brought back to live and reproduce in her Great Black Nest.

Vainest of the four, and the most secretive, Ooradryl parthenogenetically created three replicates of himself, smaller versions who would grow as they fed: the ghastly Waru, whom he decked in golden shields and is the most famous; Uthoqquan, who was gifted electrum armor; and Nyeegath, who he covered in silver. Later, others of sundry shapes would be spawned.

Like shamblers from the stars, the Kindred of Ooradryl went forth in Illathurion—Uthoqquan to tell tales of secret knowledge, Nyeegath to sing psalms of eternal mastery, and Waru to offer visions of pleasure and opulence. Devoted nations would come to offer up sacrificial victims to them on the malignant, teeming worlds of flagitious Oozultharoum, spectral Xanthiir, and the charnel pits of Mezzallmech. But the Kindred longed to soar throughout the benighted galaxy, to what purpose they did not tell, for they did not share the ambitions of their so-called siblings, and the preoccupations of the Architects, which they would obey for now, were not their own.

Into the Charnel Worlds, Typhojem was summoned in secret. There he was met by siblings and offspring, a few that looked like him, but he did not believe this and spurred them at this time. Some, like Ghatanothua, first and most powerful of the latter, had been sealed deep beneath his mountain on Urthha by the D'mi'go, monstrous, winged terrors who crossed the aether on burning wings from Yugami. Others,

[33] Nytocris derives from *nyct-* and *cresce*, "the expanding night" or "growing darkness."

like Ythogtha and Zoth-Ommog, had been released from the cosmic or underground vaults the Celestials had prisoned them in.

Furious at what he believed was a deception, he determined now to make his own offspring. It has been said that from the *ex-vivo* imbruement of Typhojem's prostatic germ and the stolen oosphere of Tilotny (called *Idh-yaa*) came the Xothians, a floating cephalopod race spawned on Xoth (later known as Xo), and from them came the leathery-skinned, multi-limbed Sarmak (called Molluscs by those who had no comprehension of things). But the Star-spawn of Typhojem did not know much of their Mighty Mother and looked like their father, though they were smaller of stature. In these early days the Xothians had the power to petrify their opponents with but their stare, and this drew the ire of allies and enemies alike.[34]

Others who emerged from the Charnel Worlds to toil under Typhojem were the goat-shaped Galderians who'd earlier served the Serpent Lords on Urthha; the demonic Makurth, who scoured the galaxy in search of prey for their master; and the Ny'ghan grii, who were the hidden ones. Many of his earliest cults worshipped Typhojem by different appellations, for he did not want it revealed that he was amassing a power base that he would one day turn against the Architects. Thus, in Illathurion, the Uukaablians, Kordan slaves, and Necromancers of Neverwhere knew him as Uhluhtc, a name that was corrupted years later by the Nikto for their fire-god, Ultan'eqiq.

Other races that came to serve Typhojem were the bloodthirsty Yevetha, avatars of evil who warred with the fearless Sanyassans for the favor of the gods; the wicked Zanibar, who went on to become weapons designers; and the formidable Mairan, who could erase memories (including that of their hated masters as they learned when they escaped to an ocean world in the Hapes Cluster). And some, paying only tacit avowal to the competing gods, sought to let them fight amongst themselves whilst they went about making empires of their own.

The Phantom Lords witnessed all of this and smiled, and across the abyssal gulfs of Otherspace, nightmarish potentates arose to establish independent fiefdoms. Amongst these were the three-headed Taknaath, later made wardens of the dismal chambers of Cykranor in the vast Citadel of Cykranosh; the faceless and slippery Void-Horror, rolling and flapping alone in the black aether; the ghastly Lotek'k, the Terror from Beyond, and his Vathyr spawn from the cold reaches of dim Yumar; draconic Malmourral, who sleeps in the Frangawl Temple on Bardotta; the Ultimate Horror, who corrupted Almuric until the coming of Ironhand; and the Energy Hydra, Vauvert, who would be trapped by the Celestials on Nilrebmah XIII.

So Illathurion swelled into a phantasmagoric realm of etiolated worlds and cyclopean cities wherein lurked surreal and feculent inhabitants, the extravagant procreation and animate breeding experiments of three terrible powers: the Ancient Ones, the Old Ones, and the Architects. In the millennia to come, the High Shaman of the

[34] Some say the Xothians were born of Typhojem's sister. Whatever the case, they diminished in power and numbers, and it is said that the catalyst for this was the betrayal of their father's brother who joined the Elder Gods. They later renamed themselves the J'feh to disguise their dark ancestry.

Order of the Terrible Glare would collectively refer to the monsters, servants, and wicked spirits of this realm who paid diabolic obeisance to the necromantic kings and the ferine godspawn as the Rozzum.

It was during this period that six demoniac pedumbrations came before the Old Ones. They did not reveal their origins or names, but it was known they had secretly passed through dimensional borders. They were known to some as the Shadow Kings and to others as the Urumolki, Adumbrali, Living Shadows, Black Angels, Shadows of Eld, Blackest Lords, Hadzusk'ari, Anti-Matter Men, and Saticons. Some said they were messengers of their dark masters; others believed they were the masters themselves. All that they whispered in their harsh discourse were a few scant words in umber voices of dead, dry husks: "No newborn are you, but kin of *our* kind, Hell-spawn of Tehom, shaped from the blood, spirit, and offal of the ancient Lords of Darknesss, for which reason you truly are *old* ones. Hearken now to the Outer Gods to whom you owe fealty, and do not hinder the work that belongs to the shadowsss."

"Our fealty is to the Architects alone," declared Thargorograht in her clicks and rasps, speaking for all despite the low roars, contemptible whispers, and phrenetic babblings of her siblings, "they who gave us life and dominion beyond measure."

"Is that sssooo, *Zstylzhemghi*?" they mocked, "we shall seee…" And with that, the Shadow Kings dissipated into the night, leaving the Old Ones to ponder cryptically.

"These are not my offspring!" Tilotny stated with barely concealed rage at Cold Danda Sine after she had summoned her siblings to her demesne in Shumath-Ghun. Turning on Splendid Ap, she added: "*You* orchestrated this! You brought forth these abominations from… *elsewhere*!"

While he tried to burble an answer, Cold Danda Sine, who looked upon the coming conflict as a cosmic game of Firepath, a pastime he'd recently invented after Splendid Ap created Tower of Honai, retorted, "What matters the specifics of whence they emerged, whether the birth canal be the well of Tilotny or the well of the Outer Void? So long as we hold the leash, what difference does it make if they germinated from my seed or the mysterious vortex of nightmare and dream that echo beyond the spiral's edge, manifestations in multiform of an older Abyss?"

"To perambulate the copious dimensional variances is no great task for one such as I," explained Splendid Ap, "as it likely was not for them, nor to embrue with xenogenetic material the fecund lacuna of the womb."

"Is *that* what you did!" It was said icily, but her eyes burned. Tilotny knew that Splendid Ap had been growing in knowledge and power and might one day turn from her as Sine had already started doing. But at the moment, she didn't care. "I asked for *offspring*, not these… *horrors*."

"What do you think *we* are if not horrors?" Sine said coldly. "But truth has become so pliant that it is hard now to distinguish it from the lies we tell ourselves. We are not the rightful sovereigns of Skyriver. Older forces over whom we wield scant power—hidden Charnel Gods reigning upon Charnel Worlds in *our* own dimension—prepare to battle for supremacy against the Celestials and their progeny. Had we

known this… had we known that we are something *else*, we might not have severed ourselves from our brother and so avoided becoming the debased beings we are, the implementers of delirium on these spheres."

"All that we *know* is that a splinter sect of the Celestials seeks power," Tilotny reasoned, turning slightly paler as she recounted the memory, "and unlike their pacifistic brethren, they *will* prove a threat."

"Though you do not apprehend it," Splendid Ap replied, "we had long before fathomed your concerns that *they* would come to supplant your supremacy, and it is for this reason that we brought forth these that you deem *abominations*, for to generate the power necessary to overcome your adversaries in the Charnel Worlds, it was necessary to draw substratal components from there… a task similar to but not the same as the one I perfected from ages past when I'd manifested an offspring akin to but antithetical to me—an entity from which Mnggal-Mnggal was brought forth."

"I loathe to surmise who the mother was!" mocked Cold Danda Sine.

Ap only rolled his eyes. "Mere protastic spores from the slothful twin of Aion who may be the source of the others and trapped with his spawn in the Cavern of Y'quaa."

"For how long? Your grandchild alone threatens to devour all!" Tilotny exclaimed.

"Repellant as that mass of entropy, psychosis, and death is," Ap explained, "his nature is such that he functions differently on different worlds, each of which has its own metaphysical nature due to the Elementals and elements that govern them, so is he limited." Ap spoke correctly in regard to this deadly entity, as would be shown in the years ahead. Upon one world he manifest as an amorphous shapeshifter; upon another, a devouring blob; upon yet another, an animator of the dead. On some worlds he'd prove potent; on others weak. Formidable though he could be, particularly as he fed and gained strength, he was not unconquerable, as discovered by those clever enough to find his weakness. Yet, as he spread himself upon different worlds, he increased his ability to survive and thrive. "Now that he has tested you, he and the others will serve as your throne guardians and emissaries. Admittedly, they are… less than ideal, but they wield some power against the Charnel Gods."

"They *cannot* be trusted," Tilotny mused bitterly.

"Onerous and Exigent Tilotny, fear of annihilation will keep them in line," assured Cold Danda Sine mordantly. "They shall serve our aims or be unmade! So let us no longer harp on our *imperfect* methods and bring forth ships for all of our doting vines and nodes and see what this war we are about to start brings…"

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

EMPIRE OF THE NECROMANCERS

SYNAGOGUE OF THE SERPENT

Those who saw the Serpent People and lived to tell of it presumed they were one of the many races of Illathurion engineered by the Architects or Old Ones. Mnggal-Mnggal knew from whence they'd come, but he was not telling. So were the ancient Serpent Folk left to carry out the secret agendas of their murmuring masters as they were sent to various worlds across the galaxy to instruct the peoples there in the ways of the shadow. Of the related serpentine races who slank into Skyriver at this time, though others would emerge in later times, there are three:

- The limbless Uror served as curators on the fearsome world of Ourane in Illathurion. Within the hollow of the three crimson-sunned world were vast chambers where the Uror, led by Emperor Ysjofer, kept a growing collection of specimens catalogued of the numerous races that populated the galaxy, preserving them alive but immobile in display cases. Several malevolent serpentine races came from their breeding experiments, such as the Ahram of Alahram, the Passar of Serpine, and the Slith of Sathiemon, all of whom sought dominion in the Illisurevimurasi sector, as in Bardo, their tombworld. For a time, the Uror remained on Ourane, reproducing in great numbers while developing the most potent weapons for future use.
- The bipedal, serpent-headed Valusians were illusion-casters who ruled as scientists and sorcerer-priests over great and terrible empires on the continents of Valusia, Lemuria, and Poseidenis. The Galderians served them loyally. And as Masters of the Mahar, they hunted with the Ahak Maharr and populated the underworld with their servant Sagoth and others until Tilotny had the Serpent People eradicated from Urthha. A remnant fled to Sol and the waterworld of Valusia.
- Of the three, the Ssither come most into this account. On Sol, they seduced and mated with a colony of Gorm and produced the Gormak.[35] Additionally, they created a hybrid Human offspring race called Gurs who were sent to dominate the Antares system. On Urthha, they spawned the Sithic Labrithodons Yet their vilest acts were those done as the Sorcerers of Marahn and the Wizards Caer Dhu. After spawning the Sith hornets, they stole the secrets of the Quiru mages and were sent forth to steward the Eruthros on Drômenregn where they reclaimed by their true name as the Ssither servants of Sithlan.

[35] The Gormak kingdoms fell long ago. After an unpleasant war with the Tzikk, who served the Night Queen, and their failed attempts to take over Sol, the Gormak withdrew to Voss to live away from the conflicts of their vicious masters. Today its people are known merely as Saurians.

QUIRU MAGES OF THE RED PLANET

For Urthhan scientists of later ages, the question of how so great a variety of Humans and near-Humans had come to be in their solar system and beyond had answers rooted in the distant past and stemmed from the activities of the Earthworlds, the lost Infinity Gate that once ferried Humans to the corresponding Star Temple on the Red Planet, and to the ancient arrival of the Quiru mages.

In the days following the appearance of that necrophilous god on Drômenregn, the Quiru mages were apprised of the dark tidings. Fearing what it presaged for the Eruthros, they departed in search of answers to the world the Humans of Urthha call Mars. It had different names at different times. To the ancient Yorhi, it was Aihai. To the Xi, it was Tyrr. But with the coming of Vulthoom, it was known as Barsoom.[36]

Aeons before Illyriaqüm came to be; before the twelve greatest Thark tribes united under the Jeddak T'Syriél; before the descendant of Dotar Sojat, Aron Peacebringer, established peace between them and the Calian Confederacy; before even the system was renamed Shiva, the Quiru mages arrived on this most populous of worlds with questions: *Who are these Humans and are they indeed the dire threat the elders so fear that they were willing to abandon all sense and reason? Is this dark god the same one that had haunted the Red Planet? Can the crisis facing Drômenregn be averted?*[37]

Upon arriving, the Quiru were greeted by the Swimmers, the People of the Sky, and the Ulfi races, none of whom reported any major problems with the settlers from Urthha. In fact, the Zelosian colony of Brokol was so taken with the Humans they altered their appearance to more closely resemble them.[38]

And in the great cities of Horz, Korad, and Torquas, the seafaring Orovar dynasty, a Human peoples, had been producing offspring with the indigenous Black Martians for years. The latter were called First Born for being the first race fashioned on Xancibar near the Lost Sea of Korus by Lord Lleowll, the Primeval of the Neti, who shaped them akin to the Sephi, only oviparous with ebony skin, eyes, and hair.

Despite the world's façade of tranquility, the Quiru knew that something was amiss. For one thing, Lord Lleowll was nowhere to be found. For another, it was disconcerting to learn of the presence of Serpent Men and their experimental Thither race up north. It was strange too to find a Seth cult amongst the Orovars. And even odder was the fact that Human and non-Human races were paying obeisance to strange gods, the most prominent of which was the one called Issus, Goddess of Life Eternal. Her religion would later be coopted by a matriarch of the First Born, but in this era it was clear to the Quiru that Onrai had made her presence known. But they were out of time…

The Prira Cen had arrived… A blue-haired, golden-eyed Sephi branch of sorcerer-scientists, the Prira Cen had come to see how their Ulfi offspring were faring, and they too wished to learn what these Humans were up to.

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[36] In the nations of Klanvahr, Kalsifar, and Rylik they call their world Shiva and Urthha Dhu Gong.
[37] Illyriaqüm is an ancient name, meaning "the sands of Ilyria," a reference to the White Sybil of old.
[38] Other botanical species are known to have done this, possibly as a form of protective mimicry. The Delvians adapted the look of Umbarans to hide their true descent from the Kkore of Illathurion.

Although there were some who felt the proud Sephi race would do better to get their own house in order, Queen Mab, doyenne of the Quiru mages, understood. She knew it was the Sephi's nature to provide aid (or *meddle*, as her Eruthros brethren would say), for she had years earlier forged close ties with Regent Reuel, suzerain of the Prira Cen. [39] So, the Quiru mages welcomed the Prira Cen to Aihai with great celebration. With the galaxy changing and mysterious things said to be in hiding, both agreed that it was their incumbent duty to find out exactly what was going on.

At this time, the Quiru were summoned back to Drômenregn. The grim mages ignored it, deciding that they would sooner forsake their home than become the servants of feculent gods. They then divulged the shameful state of their people to their Sephi allies, who in turn acknowledged what many long suspected: their great kingdom was fracturing. Thus, they forged their friendship into a binding alliance, forsaking Eruthros and Sephi alike to learn of this Enemy and defeat him.

The beginning of the end would come with Rhiannon of the Quiru mages. Prideful and foolish, he welcomed the Serpent Men then living in Marahn to his island home. Deceiving him with flattery and a false history of themselves as children of the Lohari (who were the serpentine progeny of the Hysalrians), he taught them guarded secrets. Inane as his actions were, the Quiru had not then known the reach of Sithlan, who the ancient Humans of Urthha knew as Thasaidon and Taaran. Now armed with their newly-acquired mantic arts, thanks to Rhiannon, a contingent of Serpent People now left Aihai for Drômencas to begin their work there. These would be called the Ssither.

In punishment for his careless arrogance, Rhiannon was entombed with his riches in a pocket dimension concealed far from bustling Jekkara in the deepest places of the desert where few ever roam. After this, the Quiru mages marched on Marahn, the City of Wizards, killing all the evil ones they could and leaving the rest trapped as angry spirits beneath the ice. But they did not finish the job, for other Serpent Men dwelt in Rhiannon's Lost Islands and the far-off city of Caer Dhu. These would become known as Dhuvians and the Wizards of Caer Dhu and later bring great trouble to the world.

WAR OF DOMINARI

On Drômenregn, meanwhile, the Hieratic Elders had by now re-formed into a priest class called the Kissari. Organized into six houses arranged under the High Clans, there were House Nautili, House Juralos, House Laephine, House Mortisand, House Greejatus, and House Delavas. A warrior class, the Massare, had also been established.

And as predicted, Houses Zuguruk, Erl, and Thon—which made up the High Clans—were in open rebellion, and with them the Mid Clans of Rath and Sek, who served as engineers and workers and who recoiled at the new arrangement established by the Kissari who'd illegally and immorally usurped power.

While the Massare openly mocked the High Clans, claiming they clung to the old ways because it benefited them, the Hieratic Elders spoke untruths and half-truths,

[39] *Prira Cen* literally means "the Planners." They were tasked to consider and calculate all the possible effects of a major task before the people endeavored upon it. In the fracturing of their kingdom, they had been rendered all but obsolete, as each caste now endeavored upon their own will.

mixing in fear of external threats and talk of leaders who were inept and ill-prepared for the darker reality that was upon them. Such were the lies that many of the Eruthros could no longer distinguish truth from falsehood. So did most of the houses fall in line, interested only in doing what they were told to so long as those orders came from a legitimate authority, which they accepted the new regime as.

From the instructions given them, they constructed the Grand Temple of Bathon, a massive ziggurat on the peak of Mount Zhyrion in the Valley of Irmoni on the continent of Kutha. From the Infernal Gate housed within it, the gods and their emissaries would one day emerge.

Little did they know that that day would come sooner than expected, for the people had begun to question whether they'd followed the right course, and many were altogether confused by the controversy between the Kissari and the High Clans and what exactly it all meant. But it wasn't until *they* arrived out from that mysterious portal, sixty-six cobralike Serpent Men slithering forth, that the horror of their choices hit them with the sinking commingled feeling of grief and shame. To help offset the shock of their predatory visages and the stench of death and decay that suffused them, the Ssither brought along alien slaves bearing incense, gems, and all manner of glittering and exotic treasures.

But even with all the rich baubles and precious diadems gifted to the people, many of the houses and clans were aghast at the scene unfolding before them, and the implications of their cowardly capitulation and failure to speak out struck them as an utterly ridiculous and evil thing.

Too late to turn back now, they once again stayed silent, mouths agape, as they paid loath obeisance to their ophidian stewards.

With the confidence of the predator that knows he is far above his prey, Lord Anetân-Tranth glided up the one hundred and eighty steps of the ziggurat to a podium built just above the seats of the Hieratic Elders. Grinning down at the gathered masses, he introduced himself, his people, and their role as overseers of the new Eruthros Empire. "We are the Ssither Serpent Lords sent by the gods to bring wisdom and training so that when our wondrous Masters arrive to take you in their ardent embrace, you will be ready to bring order to the sickened galaxy." The Serpent-Man had said all this with a feral grin. When it suddenly turned to a surly frown, the people gasped. "Am I to understand that Drômenregn is not united in this?"

"That is correct, Lord," said Lord Delavas, standing up to better address the very large Serpent Man. "Zuguruk refuses to accept our new arrangement, holding to the time in which the corrupt High Clans ruled all of this land."

His hood spreading, Anetân-Tranth glided down a few steps to where he stood. Lord Delavas looked up at the creature looming above him, his nose automatically crinkling at the mouldering stink that wafted over him. "The old rots away and is being made into something new," the Ssither said cryptically, "and that which is new will stoop and bow. We will deal with the Zuguruk. I am more curious to know what has become of House Annonic."

"House Annonic was not included amongst our numbers," volunteered Lady Greejatus, turning her head to the speaker but remaining seated, "for although Representative Annonic remains loyal to the Hierophants, his people amongst the Quiru

mages left for a world in Urthha's solar system where it is said they established a kingdom of their own in opposition to the Hierophants, for they have not responded to our hails to return to Drômenregn."

Once again, Anetân-Tranth smiled enigmatically. He knew well of the Quiru mages. "Our *Masters* will deal with them!"

"I should hope so," interjected Lord Mortisand, rising. Irritated as much by the smell of these creatures as by their impertinence, he added, "The Quiru were the craftsmen of *our* civilization, *our* mages. Without them, we are at half-strength!"

It was only a blur. Most of the Elders didn't even catch it. All they knew from the moments that followed was that the feet of Lord Mortisand were dangling from the mouth of Anetân-Tranth. Then, the Serpent Lord gulped, and even those were gone. Several of the Hierophants retched at the heinous act. Lord Mortisand was well-liked, but there were none who dared to avenge him, and his son alone openly wept.

"The Ssither already know the secrets of the Quiru mages and will teach them to whomever we deem *worthy*… Before we arrived, House Zuguruk divided along ideological lines, with some accepting their new position as warriors and workers, and some rebelling against the new order. Go out now, Kissari, Massare, and all the houses united, and strike the incalcitrant insurgents with a fatal blow. We will lead you… *and copious will be the blood that spills!*"

In the days and weeks that followed, brutality met brutality as opposing forces bent on decimating the other learned what it meant to maim and kill and see their former friends slaughtered at their own hands. The Ssither proved true to their word, sallying forth into the theater of war, casting torrefying deathspells.

The entirety of the M'ust House had gone into hiding by then. Having earlier spoken out against the false gods, the clan that had once been so revered—the instructors of Drômenregn's youth—were now branded with the capital offence of sedition. Even the Zuguruk turned their backs on them after they declined to fight alongside them.

But the Zuguruk leaders would come to rue their course. Under cover of darkness, a thing of madness appeared before the crouching terror-stricken house. Cowled in a costly saffron robe that shimmered like gold, his face covered by an eerie, alabaster mask, the tall being introduced himself as Destiny and the Lord of the Planes. "Death strikes from the throats and thralls of those who crawl on their bellies. If it is victory you truly seek, I will teach you to use your powers the way fate intended!"

Desperate, for already many of their people had fallen before their brethren and the awful Serpent Men, House Zuguruk agreed to follow the leadings of this strange lord. In turn, they were taught to apply alchemical apparati within the focusing chambers of their lodges so that what had once served benevolent purposes now became loci for sinister powers. And so the gifts of *lightmaking* were transformed into *inferno* magic, and other talents were twisted to aggressive purposes. From this would come Sith alchemy ranging from magical modification of inanimate matter to the summoning of tenebrous horrors.[40]

[40] Most Sith erroneously believed that this spell let them wrangle life from raw creation, unaware they were actually opening a temporary portal into the elemental, abstruse, thaumaturgical cauldron of the Charnel Worlds to bring forth one of the deadly spawn of the Darkness.

Of those not seduced into stultification or driven into paroxysms of psychosis, the members of Houses Erl, Thon, Rath, and Sek—declaring that they would have nothing to do with this disturbing trickster-god—made a pact with the M'ust to depart offworld with any who would join them.

From these houses, many were discovered and killed, but those who managed to escape departed for the world of Tython, then named Talss. Henceforth, they would put aside the evils of their past and start anew. Affiliates of the former houses now mixed together as one, and from them came Myriam of House Langhesi who led a large group to establish Langhesa to do what good they could in the galaxy.

As for the M'ust, they fled to a world called Vannus, which would later be known as Ventooine, though a small group opted for Medriaas instead. From the gifts bestowed on them by the Celestials came forth new civilizations, though the one on Vannus was hidden, and they were ever after aggrieved at the fall of their people and culture and they blamed themselves for not having done enough to prevent it.

With the Massare falling in droves before the sudden potent invultuations employed by House Zuguruk, the Kissari turned to the Ssither for answers. But Anetân-Tranth would only grin evilly and hiss, "You will have to do *better* if you wish to prove yourselves worthy!"

But behind closed doors, the Ssither wondered at this, concluding that the hands of their masters were at work and that this game had been arranged. Thereafter, they withdrew from the battlefield, urging the Eruthros on to greater violence and teaching them new combat spells, such as *sutta chwituskak*, a hex in which noxious green lights could be shot from one's hands like arrows, and *jen'wodza*, which invoked necrotic Dark Side tendrils to reach up from the ground and ensnare anything within a three-meter radius. So what began as a rout exploded into the War of Dominari![41]

The Zuguruk rebels did as well as could be expected, but with increasingly diminishing numbers and the loss of support from the Mid-Clans, they could not long hold out. And the Hierophants now began taking captives and forcing them to teach what incantations they'd learned. Loyal ones were reassimilated into the larger forces. Defiant ones were saved for grisly oblations, as an abject lesson for insurrection, their tortured meat served as a delicacy for the Ssither and their chosen acolytes.

The Hierophants won the War of Dominari. In the aftermath, before the gathered priests and clans, Anetân-Tranth declared, "Henceforth, you are no longer Eruthros but *Sith*, so named for the immortal deity for whom we are also named. No longer is this world Drômenregn. The Kingdom of Dreams is now *Drômencas*, the Kingdom of Nightmare! For now, however, we will use our adversaries' ignorance to our advantage while we expand. You who walk amongst the races that are yet mentally enslaved to the Elder Gods will feign peace while secretly abjuring the idea as foolishness, will pretend humility while secretly cursing the Celestials and their Supreme Maker, will act as if weakness is noble and good while secretly recognizing that power alone brings about order from chaos, freedom from bondage, wisdom from darkness.[42]

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[41] *Jen'wodza* ("dark entrails") is the name given for *Dark Side Tendrils* in the ancient Sith language. Other spells derive from older tongues and bear their own corrupt names.

[42] Drômenregn literally means "Kingdom of Dreams." Drômencas is the "writhing/twisted dream."

"Amongst the stars roam the agents of chaos; our holy war will be fought against these and all who in their cowardice will not fight! Our perpetual theater of conflict will be fought with the might of the machine and magic, much of which we will continue to teach to you as you prove worthy! Do not balk at this, for if one wishes to live, he must be willing to kill. Feel no compassion for beast or man; to the strong, they are fodder for toil or the belly. What is the glorious struggle for survival if not a conquest for the means of existence? And does this not require the elimination of competitors from these same sources of subsistence? One is either the hammer or the anvil, and it is our purpose to prepare you for the role of the hammer!"

Soon, the Kissari assembled for the next stage of training. Through the abhorrent art of *qâzoi kyantuska*, the Ssither demonstrated the means by which submissive populations could be mentally enslaved and turned to fiercely loyal subjects willing to kill and die for their masters. The enchantment of *odojinya* ensnared victims in gossamer webs of dark energy that temporarily severed their connection to the Force, robbing them of vitality. And within the foul rite of *dwomutsiqsa*, the deadly Gallu (Smoke Demons), Sithspawn Monoliths, Dreambeasts, and the weird, geometric Yroo'xrksvi could be summoned from the Nightmare Realm… And that very night, around the squalid fires that flickered feebly beneath the gibbous moons in the noxious swamps of Zapunu, several arose.

Not long after, the Ssither again gathered all the people and taught them the starry wisdom of the Immortal Gods of the Sith and their chthonic kin, and bestowed onto them a distorted knowledge of the Architects: Co Pana Cine, the God of Death; Ibon'aci, the Master of time, space, and technology; and the Magna Mater, or All-Mother, the goat who birthed ten thousand young. Their teachings were a mixture of truths and falsehoods that placed Father of Shadows in the role of the ancient progenitor and the Immortal Gods in a pantheon with the Great Old Ones, denigrating the Elder Gods as "space devils," usurpers, liars, and agents of chaos.

The Ssither produced offspring with chosen Sith females. Though culling from those considered to be the best specimens, the Serpent Men found their forms unpleasant to the eye. So, casting painful enchantments, they transformed them into the serpentine Nagas, leaving only their heads as they'd originally been.

The Nagas held considerable prestige in society, for it was thought they might supplant even the Kissari one day, but many had become insane due the transmogrification or become embittered and hostile, and so this did not come to pass. Male offspring of the Ssither and Nagas were sent through the gate in the Grand Temple to what destiny none but the Ssither knew, but to their distraught wives they told a tale of the glorious destiny that awaited them in which they would have great power and riches.

Female offspring were called Lamiae, and they wielded no small amount of innate magic as they were taught the wisdom of Drômencas and the Charnel Worlds. Lamiae were more mentally stable than their mothers, but no less loyal to them for it, and cunning, for they understood the ever-shifting dynamics of power in their society. And much was about to change.

The day came when Anetân-Tranth made the long-awaited announcement:

"We have heard the call from the ancient depths. The Outer Gods, who are your Masters and ours, are coming to bestow a great gift unto you! These Ancient Ones will establish a dynasty on Drômencas. You of the Massare, prepare your daughters for this greatest of honors! They are to be married and will become the mothers of a divine bloodline of kings and queens that will never be broken!"

In the years that followed that shocking speech, when the blackest of spirits arrived, choosing whom they would before departing again, the Ssither reorganized the political structure on Drômencas into eleven houses from which six Ssither would reign in each as Priests. Under them, affairs would be governed by a matriarchy of eighteen tyrannous Witch-Queens, they who had been the betrothed of the gods.

The Witch-Queens ruled in cruelty and horror under Empress Harla, the Dread Mother, who was the most powerful amongst them, before whom even armies trembled. The Nagas were intended to have served as Priestesses under their serpentine

fathers, but after a scandal erupted in which several Lamiae were discovered having murdered the royal offspring in the Hallowed Creche while everyone slept—and that this infanticide was orchestrated by their jealous Naga mothers who'd grown fearful of losing their power and prestige—they were confined to the labyrinthine bowels of the Synagogue of the Serpent and its surrounding forest on Mount Zhyrion. This iniquitous fortress built across from the Grand Temple by the strange servants of the Ssither was shrouded in darkest rumor, fueled in part by the fact that none beside the Ssither and their kinfolk ever visited it unlessly expressly invited, and this was a rare occurrence.

When the Witch-Queens announced that the Nagas would be rounded up and executed, the Nagas appealed to their husbands, but the Serpent Lords would not countermand the authority of those betrothed of the gods, though they did stay their hands when it came to their Lamiae daughters. Many Nagas escaped to the Temple of Bathon to follow their sons through the Infernal Portal, thinking it better to brave the strange lands of Illathurion than face the wrath of the Witch-Queens.

With them out of the way, the Witch-Queens now elevated their own cambion sons to higher positions of authority. Despite their varying and hideous appearances, these ravening giants, collectively known as the Rafa, grew into terrible and terrifying sovereigns decked in scale armor. The strongest and most ruthless of the Rafa were summoned by their fathers and ushered through the Infernal Gate to bridle the Charnel Worlds. Many did not return. Some went forth to rule hellish regions within the Outer Darkness as necromantic kings. A few came back. Of these there is the monstrous Xanxathotep of Xanthiir and the crowned Caliph of dim Yumar.[43]

Of their daughters, the Witch-Queens were more circumspect, having learned some wisdom from the Nagas, and they sequestered them away to a hidden cloister offworld that would not easily be found.

In the iron domination of the Witch-Queens and the giant Rafa royals, it soon became apparent that there was no longer a place for the Kissari Priesthood on Drômencas apart from a diminished role as court magicians, viziers, and tutors for their bestial children and grandchildren. The Kissari were yet in considerable numbers, but they knew that the moment they were perceived as a threat, they would be executed. A few recalcitrant Kissari had already been offered up as sport or food, for the giants were perpetually hungry and irritable, oft complaining of the noise their subjects made.

The conspiring members of the ancient houses now gathered in secret. It had been many years since Houses Nautili, Juralos, Laephine, Mortisand, Greejatus, and Delavas had come together. Most of the original lords and ladies yet lived, but of those who did not, their eldest sons or daughters assumed their positions. At last, it was decided that the wisest course would be to obtain the counsel of the Ssither.

As it would be imprudent for the Kissari to be seen entering the Synagogue of the Serpent publicly, a company of nine was chosen and covertly sent to make their way to the gloom of their obscure temple on Mount Zhyrion to inquire as to whether the Kissari's original purpose, as spoken of years earlier, was ever to see fulfilment. Prince

[43] Some of the giant statues in the Valley of Golg on Korriban are horrifyingly more life-sized than the New Republic analysts of the *Jynni's Virtue Tapes* would care to admit.

Karel Mortisand, the son of the late Lord Mortisand, had insisted on leading them. Concealing his hatred of the Serpent People, he determined that if they would not aid the Kissari, he would use the opportunity to take his vengeance on Anetân-Tranth for the murder and consumption of his father.

As they soon discovered, the Synagogue was no ordinary temple but a place of darkest shadows designed to test the invited few as to their worthiness for ascension. Karel had pried a tale of terror from a servant of one who had not returned. But knowing the dangers did not mean knowing how to evade them. Despite their plans, the nine were split up and transported by hidden porticoes to various parts of the arcane citadel. One Kissari was lost in the sphincter-like pits that fell in fearsome spirals. A second was seduced by a hungry Lamia who nested there. The third was devoured by one of the nameless pets of the Ssither. The fourth was dismembered by the Protector. The fifth and sixth were stalked and killed by Smoke Demons manifesting as their own fears.

Karel and two other surviving Kissari made their way to the central Chamber of Divination. Within that foul-smelling, sunken catacomb burned braziers and a great athanor in the rear, fitfully illuming huge stone vats and wide columns carved with obscene obsidian grotesques. Shadows flittered across the lurid scene cast by the cruelly grinning Serpent-Priests from their debased thrones made of the same ebon material as the walls and floors presently splayed with the sinuous, besotted bodies of prostate Lamiae and the lovers they'd taken from captives. The smell of powerful opiates and burning incense mingled with the stench of decay from the cauldrons brimming with the juices and meat carved from infidels and prisoners.

"You are fools seeking death," spat Hypernia, the Naga Queen, crouched beside Anetân-Tranth. Of the Nagas, she was the only one to have remained on Drômencas.

"The Rafa are monsters who will destroy this world before they carry out the will of the Immortal Gods," refuted the bold prince. "They have already begun to hunt and devour Kissari. How long before they come for you?"

"The Serpent People have no fear of the Rafa," hissed Anetân-Tranth confidently.

"*You* may not, but what of your wives and daughters?"

"Is this true?" demanded Hypernia. "Are we in danger from the giant kings?"

The Serpent Lords turned to look upon one another, able to communicate to other Ssither without words. As Anetân-Tranth slithered off his throne, Karel grasped the dagger on his belt. Upon it he'd cast foul spells, but so proximate to the presence of the execrable snake in his own lair, he fell to doubt and fear. When the tall, hooded creature glided past, commanding him to "follow," he did so. Escorting them through safe passages out of the temple, the Anetân-Tranth's only counsel was this: "You will have to be stronger and shrewder than your father! This holds for all of the deposed Kissari. Power belongs to those who will take it… *by one means or another!*"

The prince and his companions returned to report Anetân-Tranth's words, which the Kissari took as a sign of their approval. Now they considered a plan. While some thought to depart Drômencas to establish a rival kingdom elsewhere, Lady Juralos proposed that the Kissari continue to dissimulate, behaving as humble and grateful servants. Clandestinely, they would sow the seeds of mistrust in their mistresses and masters, driving animosity, whispering truths and half-truths, turning siblings against siblings, cousins against cousins, and children against parents.

BROOD OF THE WITCH-QUEENS

All they had to do was watch and wait…

It took less than one generation for the simmering paranoia, furtive scheming, and ruthless backstabbing stirred up in secret by the Kissari to burst out from beneath the surface into Drômencas' second civil war. Known as the Gigantomachy, ferine kings marched forth to slice the heads off of ferine kings; sorcerous queens cast execrable spells upon one other; once trusted family and friends sent assassins and poisoners to kill suspected traitors; even children murdered their parents for the sake of petty grievances or to hasten dominions deferred… and in the confusion, the Kissari had the Massare legions, whom they'd covertly recruited to their side, take out the rest.

It took a great many parangs, swords, and spells to bring her down, but the Dread Mother was killed at last. Having wrested back control, the Kissari declared themselves Sovereign of Drômencas. To inaugurate their reign, they formed the Ninûshabzu, which was comprised of the six leading conspirators behind the coup.[44]

Finally, the Ssither emerged from their temple to undulate once more up the one hundred and eighty steps to address the bowed Kissari, who nervously awaited their blessing (or punishment) for having orchestrated the downfall of the Witch-Queens

[44] In antiquity, *Ninûshabzu* would have been rendered "Lords of the Underworld (or Abyss)." Its evolution over time saw *Nin* (Ninûs or Ninûsh in the plural) come to mean "weavers" or "knotters," as in those who weave spells and knit plots.

and their demonic brood. "*This* is the way of the Sith!" hissed Anetân-Tranth with a cruel smile. "But always there are consequences. For the Ninûshabzu, this is your fate: Because it was the wives of the Immortal Gods and their children that you slaughtered and deposed, they have proclaimed that you must stand before them for judgement. Perhaps if you prove to be as strong as you were clever, you will yet be *rewarded*…" This last word was said in a clearly sinister tone. The Ninûshabzu paled in terror; one even dropped dead from the fear. Some of the other Kissari traded veiled looks and gloating smirks, for they reckoned that they would be elevated in place of their chastised elders, but Prince Mortisand only looked down in dismay.

From this point onward, the Massari were added to the ranks of the Zuguruk to become the new warrior caste, now called the Massassi, with only a rare few deemed gifted enough to be trained in the sorcerous arts.

Of the Rafa who had not been killed, the Ssither sent them to conquer for the glory of the Immortal Gods of the Sith. Their first targets were the Renunciates. "Go forth and convert the Renunciates to our cause. Kill all who will not bow, including the cowards of Sharu." But unable to penetrate the protective pyramids the Sharu had constructed, the Rafa set up colonies and renamed the Sharu system and all its planets after themselves. Others were sent to conquer Human colonies and to construct temples and cities in far-off lands, expanding the Sith domain in secret.[45]

The monoliths, ziggurats, and cyclopean cenotaphs that yet sprawl like obscene stains across the canvas of the ancient worlds of Boz Pity, Kar'kosa, Priplanus, Kiilpar, Kanteletar, Solay, Shoon, and others arose out of the copious blood shed by that hated race—who the early colonists of Boz Pity called Gargantelle—ere they were finally exterminated. The Entarrans of Entarr, having chosen a policy of strict neutrality, are the few of their kind that remain, and it is believed that they are but biding their time until the umber moons rise and the black stars align to call them to war.

Many of the Rafa structures now lie buried in the sands, and there they should remain, for within such profane places are cryptic riddles of astrology, divination, and necromancy, where the annual hecatomb was practiced in the belief that this had the power to appease Kopa Khan, though he mocked their ardent devotion, and the All-Mother, who had been the preferred object of adoration by the Witch-Queens, though her worship fell to neglect after their reign passed.

The Witch-Queens had been craftier than even the Serpent Lords, and neither the Ssither nor the Kissari knew where their Royal Princesses had been sent. For their safety, daughters of normal stature had been secreted away to the world of Aelfgar, renamed Dyzan, and there they would train until they were old and strong enough to stake their claim as successors to their mothers' stolen thrones.[46] Upon the continent of Dyzis (later Dysis), the necromantic Xan arrived with their chattel and black arts

[45] Rafa Minor in what is today known as the Corporate Sector is another system they conquered.
[46] *Dyzan* (sometimes *Dzyan*) means "the Elevated" a reference to their political status. The world's name later reverted back to a form of its original in Algara II, or Algar for short.

to serve as their protectors and teachers. So the Dyzan Princesses learned thaumaturgy, martial arts, and swordplay. Ever after, they would be known as the Stygian Witches. From their Red Queen would come the corrupt *Book of Dyzan*.

After the Ninûshabzu were sent in fetters through the portal, the remaining Kissari—now renamed the Kissai—were told they would not get away unscathed eitehr, and it was augured that when the Immortal Gods arrived, they too would have to balance the scales, though in what way they were not told. However, in the restructuring of Drômencas, as the stewardship of the omnivalent Ssither was codified, the houses were rearranged yet again under the Kissai priests, of which the greatest would serve as Potentate. Anyone skillful enough in the mantic arts could become a warlock or witch, while those with dexterity or strength could rise through the ranks to attain to the status of guard, soldier, and warrior. The best of these would be chosen as Commanders. If a Kissai Potentate was killed or died, a Potentate could be chosen from the Commanders.

Knowledge was still doled out sparingly, with only the highest echelons having access to the greater spellcraft encrypted in books and Sith holocrons. That these secrets were passed on only to the worthiest of disciples was a lure to seduce each succeeding generation of apprentices, ensuring they fought and competed in the severe and brutal training academies that would determine their role in the rigid caste system.[47]

Apart from these, the most valued people on Drômencas were the crafters, engineers, and shipwrights. Early Sith manufacturing industries were geared towards the construction of warships and weapons, a process that began with tutelage under the Faruun, who had been sent from Illathurion for this purpose. Lesser jobs were doled out to the lowest caste in Sith society, slaves harvested from other worlds, and even these were apportioned into houses. Successful houses were rewarded with luxuries; unsuccessful ones were subject to torment by the wicked masters of the house, who were themselves subject to the vagaries of the Serpent Lords.

Despite this new era of industriousness, the slaughtered Witch-Queens and their offspring would not so easily be forgotten, for they were part flesh and part spirit. Once their bodies were split open by axes and parangs or torn apart by inimical hexes or odious poisons, their wicked spirits emerged as *uduGhuls*, terrifying entities that are now known as Starweirds. And the Dread Mother would rule them all, for she had been the Bride of Aion himself, so that just prior to her immolation her black spirit was seized by the Lord of the Dead who infused her with some of his own terrible essence before raising five more Witch-Queens. They became the Starweird Queens. But Harla would be something fouler and more potent: *the Starweird Empress!*

As for the Lamiae, the sinuous daughters of the Serpent Lords, Drômencas was forfeit to them, as were their lives, for the Ancient Ones had commanded that they

[47] The Dark Holocron is the oldest surviving holocron. It came into the possession of Jedi scholar, Odan-Urr, who taught Battle Meditation to the Molavaran Jedi Adviser, Memit Nadill, before going on to found the Great Jedi Library on Ossus and create a revised version of the Jedi Code.

die in punishment for the Ssither having allowed the Ninûshabzu to overthrow the arrangement they had put in place, and not even the Serpent People could defy them.

While the grim Ssither swung their great halberds and ululate their burning incantations to slay their beloved daughters and kill Hypernia, something unexpected happened. The Starweird Queens came to the aid of their remaining offspring. There was yet one crèche that had not been harmed, and the spectral Starweird Queens made their way to the terrified Lamiae and led them through the screams and violence to the hangar bay, past the corpses of the guards that the gruesome uduGhuls had killed in advance of their arrival. Before the ships, they stopped and spoke to the eldest of the Lamiae: "A choice now you must make," the specter said to Duchess Xeel. "Open yourselves to us, and we will enter you and lead you from this world of death to a new home… or remain here in your wits and chance your fates."

"Take us!" Xeel hissed without hesitation, for the Lamiae had been trained in the ways of their grandfathers and would not tepidly surrender to death, and so they departed Drômencas through the Hypergate.

The remaining revenant spirits prowled the lightless hours with the Starweird Queens under the command of their Empress. Harla, the Dread Mother, sent them to terrorize and feed on the children of the Sith in revenge for what the Kissai traitors had done. So terrible was her vengeance at this time, and impervious to Sith spells, that she would come to be regarded as the Horla and feared as a specter of horror and death.

The Kissai gathered to discuss how to rid themselves of these vengeful spirits. They did not have power enough to dispel them, but neither could they call upon the Immortal Gods, for those who plagued them were the spirits of their wives and children; yet, if they did nothing, their society would soon collapse. Once again, they sought the counsel of the Serpent Lords. Now it would be the Potentates of each of the houses who led the expedition to that drear and haunted fortress on Mount Zhyrion.

The Ssither were stewing and surly, greatly displeased by the commands of their masters who had forced them to slaughter their own children. And even Anetân-Tranth, alien as he was to human frailty, grieved his Naga wife whom he'd had to kill. So it was that when the Kissai stepped into their domain, a blazing telepathic message was sent to each of the Potentates: "The Immortal Gods of the Sith are not the *only* Ancient Ones… there are *others* who yet prowl the empty spaces!"

Night after night of pernoctations and sacrifices followed. It was no prudent thing to summon such powers, but the Kissai studied their missals and pored over their gramaries, and thereon commingled their theurgical energies to call forth one mighty enough for the task, a fearsome and gaunt horror who now entered into their midst.

The first act of the terrifying Windagon, King of the Wind Demons, was to feed upon three Potentates, leaving little but dried, empty husks. The remaining Kissai strove with this Lord of the Spirits, compelling him to wield what power he had over the Starweirds to dispel them from Drômencas. Complying at last, but with a price, he caused several attacking specters to be rent apart before he pushed Harla and her Starweirds through the Infernal Gate, banishing them from Drômencas.

In payment for having rid the Sith of the cruel phantasms murdering their children, the Windagon was given leave to rule the boreal lands of Hoth.[48]

Bodiless as black clouds, the Starweirds roamed the macabre and secret dimension of Hyperspace until alighting on the Charnel Worlds where the Dread Mother drew forth the batlike Gorum servants and skin-changing spies, making herself the Winged Goddess of the Ecothom to that race and the Vampire Queen to another. But the uduGhuls were not content to remain upon so blasted and blackened a plane of monstrous decay. Another gate would open back to that dimension of Darkspace coeval with Skyriver where they might haunt the star-streaked vault of space.

For long centuries, the Horla would watch and wait for the right host, only occasionally finding a worthy and powerful female that she could possess for a time until the host body perished, and then she would have to go forth again in search of another until she might find one powerful and open enough to meld with as one united and mighty entity. Then she would never again have to hunt the terrible dark.

As for the Lamiae who had been subsumed by the Starweird Queens, they led the survivors to an uninhabited world they called Seidhkona, where dwelt a small colony of Sephi whom they quickly seduced. They would raise up their children in the arts, and as these grew, several chose to disperse throughout the galaxy. As with a few of the Stygian Witches, some sought out worlds in which they could serve as Wise Women, and in this way did various kings came to have enchantresses on their court or by their sides, and many became royals in their own right, teaching their daughters and granddaughters the secret arts so that their knowledge and history would pass from generation to generation.

From the long line of Xeel and her sister's descendants on Seidhkona came:

The Grand High Witch, Eva Kerlsil, Supreme Leader of Stokoryce;
The Muabite Mecress, acolyte to the Kissai King of Millinar and enchantress to Governor Kaxa of Forhilnor, who built the Stone Temple;
Dona D'aigua, the cruel and deceitful Bruixera of Cataalda;
Telekrane and Taleena, High Priestesses of the Demonlands and Overlord of Sagar.

From the stygian descendants of the Witch-Queens on Dyzan came:

Kára Volshe, the Empress of the Vahla on Ambria, builder of the Great Obelisk;
Priestess Sirsha, who subtly and cruelly corrupted her gifted daughter, Bavmorda;
Zarina, the War Witch and Queen of Zaad, who pierced the hidden dimension of the Ascended Alterrans and nearly came to rule Pendar;
Tortuna, the tyrannical enchantress and Queen of the Crown Empire;
Queen Azura of the Witch Kingdom of Syk in the underground domain of Mongo.

[48] As with the Windagon's name, his title is difficult to translate since the words for wind and spirit are interchangeable and further confused by the fact that the ancient nomenclature for "spirit" and "demon" are intertwined without reference to moral character. Similar titles might be translated as King of the Wind Spirits, Demon-god of the Spirits, and Lord of the Demons.

Those who stayed on Seidhkona were enchantresses who used powerful illusions to alter their appearances. In this way did they lure several wealthy merchant-fleets and ensorcel their crews to find them irresistibly attractive to whatever their tastes. Thereby they procured for themselves the means by which their race would not merely survive but flourish. Once they added wealth to their magical arts, they were able to enrich their barren country into a vast and luxurious Pleasure Planet.

Within a few generations, they bred out (or disguised) most of their serpentine traits for Human or Sephi ones, though their red or pink Eruthros pigmentation ever remained, but this only gave them an exotic allure to many Humans and humanoids, and they revealed themselves to the galaxy as the Seid Hetarai or Fairy Women.

As with other pleasure resorts in the galaxy, they began drawing large and affluent crowds who came to attend Seidhkona's many casinos, circuses, and shows, to have their futures told, luxuriate in the psychedelic and magical allurements, and indulge in the ornate and epicurean Lupanar Palaces and Pleasure Gardens where beautiful courtesans would seek to satisfy their every whim. In this way, the Seid Hetarai became fabulously wealthy and retained a measure of their former prestige and power. And for long years, they preserved their beauty and lives.

As to their children, girls were taught the arts; boys were employed as shield-men and escorts, and they too came to wield a measure of natural ability akin to their sisters, which they judiciously used to create delightful experiences for their guests, which elevated their status in the matriarchy. With both sexes successful as empaths, they were alloted a share of the bounty, and so they lived lives of contented leisure.

After several generations passed and their numbers grew beyond what they could comfortably accommodate, many of the younger generation were asked to establish a colony on a new world. Though some were hesitant to begin anew their lives under another tent, their affluence assured them that creating agreeable conditions would prove no great burden, and so the planet of Zeltros (from the ancient *zelt*, meaning "camp" and *otros* for "other") was established, and it would go on to become a thriving world even grander and longer-lasting than Seidhkona.

THE LEFT-HAND PATH

Prior to the start of the Empyrean Wars, the Ssither sent consummate wizards and warriors to stealthily spread out into the galaxy to ensconce themselves on worlds where other likeminded peoples dwelt, to build strong coalitions, and to pursue marriage alliances with sexually compatible races. These were not mere tactical maneuvers, but rather ways in which to consecrate and expand their territory. While later unions with the Nalroni and Korkodine, amongst others, helped expand the borders of the Sith Empire, it would be their unification with the hated Humans that would solidify their place in and beyond the coming wars.

The command to go to the Ice Crypts of Zhell on Pax, from which they were to locate their spiritual brethren amongst the Humans there, proved a stumbling block for the Sith who did not so easily shed their former Eruthrian pride or disdain for that

hated race. Also, they did not understand why they could not simply ally with the Taung to reconquer that world and wipe out the "Human vermin," as they called them. The Ssither only told them that a group would be sent to Roon for that very purpose, but whether that plot succeeded or not, the Humans were important to the coming of the masters. And that is all they would say, adding only that the Sith had to be tested. So the Kissai were tasked to sanction this crusade as a great honor.

Of those the Architects brought to the Earthworlds, several amongst the upper echelons of society traveled in abstruse circles and cultic fraternities. The activity of these secret orders had only increased with their arrival in Skyriver as devotion to the Left-Hand Path was cultivated with frightening alacrity. So, the Order of the Sith was welcomed into their fold with the promise that they would enlarge their esoteric knowledge, power, and wealth. But for this, they would pay a high price, for the Sith had come with a purpose: to produce and raise Human-looking heirs as their own.

The most successful of the Human-Sith hybrids were well-indoctrinated and trained before being sent to Human-populated worlds to take positions of authority in various arenæ, for though masqued behind a façade of culture and commerce, these worlds were intended to be seats of power for the Immortal Gods, epicenters from which the Age of Darkness would be ushered in unseen.[49]

Many would not become the strongholds the Sith had wished for. Nonetheless, all were infected by a form of darkness in the tradition of speciest superiority, cruel superstitions, rigid hierarchical structures, technocratic domination, tribal divisions, or hegemonic imperialism.

Less Human-looking offspring were utilized as warriors, as per their abilities, or given to the surgeon-mages who performed breeding experiments upon them with other races. Failures of the Sith's ruinous alchemical trials were sent to the planet's depths. Some were taken by the Paxian Ogres that yet stalked the caverns and tunnels of their underground domain. From these progeny came the dreaded Cthon, who with the Corridor Ghouls and Rat People, served as watchers and hunters of the dark underworld.

The Ogres often battled with the invading Rafa whom they hated, for the Rafa had been sent to construct the Works that ran through the crust under Pax, and though they were kept in check by nameless "pets" of the Dark Ones, they were known to devour any smaller creature they could catch. Though they longed for the days when they ruled as demigods and kings, the Rafa had had no patience for their noisy subjects whose complaints and demands kept them from sleeping, and so they were more content under Pax, preparing the world for the gods and fighting great wars with the Ogres.

[49] Among their resultant offspring, the warlike Koven – outwardly Human in every way save for their crimson complexion – were dispatched to the Kadar system and tasked with laying the groundwork for future conquests through infiltration, manipulation, and espionage.

INTERLUDE I

BETWEEN THE WILDFLOWERS AND THE WEEDS

The long days of summer had come to Mariana, one of the five countries on Chandrila along with Nor to the north, Sephina and Kime to the west, and the Night Lands of Chalimé in the far south. These had been birthed out of the larger supercontinents, Na'a and Yimk. With a gentle climate year-round and an abundance of food-bearing trees and bushes, life on Chandrila tended to be easy and dedicated to education and the arts. Those with a less pacific nature would hunt in the game preserves, but public sentiment had soured on blood sports, giving the Blackbacks, Cairnmogs, and Fecklen full protection as the Squall and others had received in years past.

While the courtly traditions of Chandrilans were vanishing with the younger generation (those in less affluent areas having abandoned them long before), Chandrilans yet had little tolerance for lawbreaking, and Chandrila boasted the best law-enforcement in the galaxy. Their justice system was sagacious enough to distinguish between the crimes of the poor and crimes of the wealthy and were lenient on the former and harsh on the latter. As there were simply too many places where the opposite was the case, white-collar criminals tended to avoid the planet, save for a few notable holdouts. Poverty and addiction existed, but here they were dealt with by means of a comprehensive system of education, rehabilitation, mental health treatment, and gainful employment. Premeditated murder, given sufficient evidence to convict, was met with a swift and painless execution. Political corruption was tolerated even less.

Summers in Mariana were warm and breezy, redolent of long, lazy afternoons spent with family, the outdoors, and good wine from any number of local vineyards. Chandrila was one of the lucky worlds. It had been spared the worst of the galactic wars, and with a populace predisposed to knowledge and peace, it was generally governed by men and women who possessed that rare combination of wisdom, compassion, and integrity. Though there were few alive who remembered, Chandrila was akin to those enchanted worlds of the Earliest Days, when life was young and carefree, and the things of nightmare had not yet crept into the galaxy.

"Son, I have a task you're not going to like." Affable, diligent, and well-respected, with a handsome face and lean build, Ormond Hextrophon was the epitome of the Chandrilan male. He'd married Ygraine young, as per custom, and had seen contentment since.

Feeling lazy this day, Arhul sighed. "What onerous task would you have me do?" Arhul Hextrophon was sixteen and bursting with energy and ideas. Adventurous enough to have plumbed the Crystal Canyons and explored the Night Lands, but sensible enough to have stayed out of harm's way and maintained above average grades, he was at the cusp of big changes in his life. Though plagued with an uncharac-

teristic anxiety that manifested as dreams of a disturbing nature, he remained pragmatic enough to allow the *winds of life to blow as they would*, as the Chandrilan saying went.

"The wild lyris fields that grow west of the estate just south of your mother's herb garden have become overgrown with weeds. They'll need to be pulled out, and neither Stern nor I have the time. I know you're busy with other things, but I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important." Timon Stern practically grew up on the estate and, if anything, was even harder-working than his father. Stern had several field-hands that he managed, but as this was the slow season, they were all enjoying their respective holidays.

"It's fine. If the weeds choke out the lyris, Mother will have a fit. I don't mind."

"You will! They're a… *different* kind than most we've seen."

"How did they come in without Timon or the other gardeners noticing?"

"They have pretty flowers!" Ormond smiled. "Your mother liked the contrast against the purple. She sees that field as an extension of her garden. And since they resemble the lyris when they're young, we all assumed they were just another wildflower."

Arhul changed clothes, grabbed a small vibroscoop and robotrowel, and strolled over to the now violet and yellow field where he got on his knees and began digging. He didn't mind. The tools did most of the hard work, and when the day was pleasant, as it often was in the northwestern part of Mariana, there was a contemplative, almost therapeutic aspect to it.

Not today, however.

The amaranthine flowers belied their nature. Not only tenaciously averse to the efforts of the robotrowel, often breaking the stem before the root could be extracted—forcing him to often switch between tools or use his hands—they were widespread, resulting in pulled grass and lyris along with it. As he looked around at the sea of xanthous flowers that surrounded him, he realized he would not be done in a few hours.

Arhul had done considerable fieldwork, for although they were of means, his father believed his children should understand "hard work and the life of the common man," as he put it, as well as the ways in which the basic necessities of life were procured.

He now tested the soil. If it was too acidic or alkaline, moist or dry, dense or sandy, it would bring about problems of varying kinds. The results revealed a balanced pH. The gardener had likely already done this and made the requisite adjustments.

Chandrilans were not quick to identify just any wildflower as a weed. Citizens of other worlds assumed that anything that could not easily be controlled was a problem. On Chandrila, they knew that wildflowers produced medicine, food, habitats for wildlife, or simply a pleasant aesthetic. A true weed was invasive and noxious to public health, other plants, wildlife, or property.

This task was going to prove more arduous than he'd hoped. Sighing again, Arhul knew he'd have to rearrange his schedule and might even miss a few social engagements he'd been looking forward to. At least this would be a one-time thing.

On the second day, he arrived hopeful, only to feel his stomach drop as he looked to see even more of the pestiferous weeds. It was as if he'd done nothing the day before. He would have to try a new tack. He dug a few meters in one spot… revealing a particularly fat and pernicious root. It was an ugly, bloated, rancid thing. And the deeper he dug

around it in order to get at its primary base and not just the lateral roots, the more he began to understand the nature of this thing's subterranean system, and the more he felt a sense of despair. They were *all* connected, likely to an even deeper underground network of impossibly huge roots. *How far did it go?* He went to the shed and came back with a cartload of natural pesticides that should shrivel up the shoots and weaken the vascular tissue and root system, dealing the enemy (for that was how he'd begun to see them) a critical blow from which it might never recover.

He returned the next day shocked to see even more of the blasted things! Never before had he been confronted by such an insidious interloper. Making a beeline back to the shed, he emerged this time with a power-shovel and a small but effective vibrosaw. Hours later, he'd made but a small dent in the problem; numerous flowering peduncles yet stood proud, defiant, and seemingly unaffected. This revelation seemed cruel and calculated, suggesting the triumph of the malevolent invader and the crushing defeat of the Hextrophons. Knowing he was suffering from exhaustion, he retired for the day.

The flowers possessed a pleasantly sweet aroma, or so he'd initially thought. But now, four days on, in the sweltering heat of the now-hated field, he found it cloying. It was as if by emitting their sickly odor, they might drive him away. With the sun beating down on his back and neck and the strange plants defying him at every turn, he began to imagine them as a kind of an imperious army marching against the native lyris, strangling, suffocating, and choking away their life so that all that remained were their tall, prideful stalks of golden petal-crowns leering into the sun.

His sister, Lysium, strolled over, chattering on about things in the outside world, things that seemed very far away, friends and music and entertainment. Ever since they were young, Arhul and Lysium had opposing temperaments. Growing up with her had been a lesson in tolerance, and he'd often remark that he'd have gotten along easier with a Gamorrean. Finally, she paused and laughed amusedly, as if just realizing the giant mess her brother had made. "Why exactly isn't dad using a droid for this?"

"He says landscape droids are obnoxious, loud, and indiscriminate."

"Yeah, when *he* was growing up," she remarked. "Technology's come a long way."

"I know. But he still hates them…."

"You remember the story? He must've told it a hundred times: 'I was just a boy…'" Lysium began to recite the oft-told tale of how wealthy Coruscantis began moving into their neighborhood with no respect or understanding for nature. Worried that a storm would bring the native trees crashing down on their heads, they opted to cut them. At the crack of dawn, their father was rudely awoken by lumbering landscape droids—their hateful buzzing and grinding noises seemed to go on forever! He'd gone to the window and watched as they tore down the old growth trees, including his favorites, the Three Sisters, gorgeous pines that had grown on the adjacent lot for over two centuries… "And that, kids, is why *our* property is now swimming in trees!"

"Every time he tells that story, I think *I'd be upset too*," Arhul revealed.

"Don't tell me *you're* becoming an eco-warrior. They're all stuck in one lane! Just go and get weed destroyer from Red Rolf's Emporium."

"And *kill* the wildflowers?" Arhul objected, aghast at the mere suggestion. "And all the beneficial insects, birds, and rabbits? Not to mention that weed destroyers have been illegal on Chandrila since forever. I might as well just set the whole thing on fire!"

"Ugh! You *are* becoming an eco-warrior! Do it the hard way if you want. I'm off to *enjoy* my summer," she said cheerfully.

"Let me guess: the Squall." It was one of the more fashionable clubs in Nayli and Lysium's favorite, as far as he knew.

"Nah, that's kids' stuff. The best music is being played at The Ringali Hell! Have you heard of Halyx? They have an Akurian on bass and a Chubbit on percussion! It's like swimming in a deep wave of sound! You *have* to come!"

"In Hanna City? You do know there are still high-level radiation readings from the defoliators used during the Clone Wars?"

"You *really* need to get out more! They've been rebuilding in the safe zones for years. Besides, I'm only going to dance for a few hours—not move into the place."

"Well… be safe."

"Only if *you'll* be dangerous!" She laughed and traipsed off. "See you, Arbol!"

Arhul smiled at the private joke. Lysium used to tease that he was named after the family dog. Their father rarely talked about him, but their mother told them privately, after they'd gotten older, that before they were born their father had a dog named Arbol. So terribly did he grieve the poor beast's death that he couldn't bear the thought of his kids going through that, and so Arhul never had pets. Their mother hadn't argued the point since she'd had a similar childhood experience on her family farm. It had happened one day in late Hinggnih, which was the dry season. A fire started while everyone was sleeping. Although her family thankfully survived, they'd lost a Cracian Thumper, several Tusk Cats, and a Mooka. Ygraine had been heartbroken.

Now, as Lysium walked off, pirouetting to some alien music playing only in her head, he felt a longing to join her on whatever adventure she was off to. Instead, he went back to work. Over the past few days, he'd thought about telling his father that it was pointless, that he should hire someone else to do it, but each time he saw the look in his eyes—which held an expression he couldn't place—he reconsidered and accepted the cool beverage he invariably offered: "You should get some rest. It'll be there tomorrow."

"Thanks, but the more I do now, the sooner it *won't* be." That was what Arhul told himself anyway, but his father's slightly arched brow refuted his confidence in that.

On the fifth day, he saw no great progress from the day before. It was like the weeds had already won. The rot had set in. For every stalk he tore out, another three were ready to replace their fallen comrade. They drained the life from the lyris like the mythical Anzati sucking the soup of their victims, killers with smiling faces of bright, yellow petals. Where before he was ramped up for battle, now he only longed to walk away from this death-field of decay and never look back.

Whether from the heat or the sheer exhaustion of trying to pull out seemingly endless roots, Arhul began to think he was seeing the weeds sway to and fro. It struck him as odd that they should do so since there was no breeze with which to manipulate their synchronous gyrations, and the longer he looked, the more it resembled a form of ritualistic dance.

He stopped and stared. They had gone still again. Or so it seemed. Something was off. Probably his mind. Stems did not twitch. Flowers did not have eyes or mouths. And both of these now opened before him! *How cruel their expressions are!* By whatever unnatural means brought them to horrid life, they now produced long sword-like thorns. Their intent became plain when they began to march towards his house, its walls offering little protection against them as they slipped in through the slightest cracks in the windows and doors, into the private sanctum of the Humans living there. Their yellow faces smiled wickedly as they extended their deadly arms to stab and slash and tear!

"Why are you doing this?" Arhul screamed at them.

The tallest of the monstrous plants turned back to face him with its black eyes. Hissing, it said, "Because we hate the occupation of Man!" They drew nearer to him now, thorn-arms raised to strike… and then darkness fell….

It was dawn when Arhul jumped out of bed and threw on the lamp. His cold fear now turned to anger, and he arose, washed up, and returned to the field determined to win. He would treat the weeds as the mocking, detestable villains they were, and so he pulled at their roots with abandon, anxious to be done with the whole ordeal that he now regretted agreeing to do.

He made progress, but as the day pressed on, with the return of the mounting heat and exhaustion, frustration took over. Forsaking tools, he dove in with his hands, ripping and tearing and not realizing that in his rage, he'd moved further away from the main area, eager to kill them anywhere their evil stalks manifested.

The next thing he knew, dozens of rare plants from his mother's garden lay in his fists and strewn all about him. In his frenzy to purge the field of invaders, he'd torn at the very thing he'd been charged to protect. Although several full-grown specimens remained intact and free from his slaughter, the younger plants did not survive. Taken from their roots, shredded into pieces, they couldn't even be replanted. Grief assailed him.

With sweat still pouring down his face, and his arms and legs covered in grime, he approached his father. "It's done!" he announced, panting heavily.

"You did good, son!" Ormond complimented.

"I *didn't*," he confessed. "I killed a lot of mother's rare plants. At the moment, I couldn't distinguish between them. I guess I wasn't paying attention. I was just so angry."

"Your mother will be upset, but she'll recover. New ones will be planted and grow… in time. Unfortunately, so will the weeds next year."

"You're *joking*," Arhul started angrily. When his father only looked at him with a rueful smile, he added, "You're *not* joking!" He could have collapsed right then and there.

"They're probably under the entire property…" When he saw the look of dismay on his son's face, he added, "but you *did* harm them. And that counts for something."

"But you said they'll come back."

"Wash up and come sit with me."

Arhul did as instructed. The cold water he splashed on his face felt divine as did the cold Reythan lemon-berry juice that his father had laid out on the wrought-iron table

that overlooked the house and northeastern part of the estate. "You're completing the final part of your studies and will soon be out and about in the galaxy."

"I'm in no rush to leave," Arhul insisted after taking a deep gulp of the refreshing beverage. "Depending on what field I go in, I might even stay on another few seasons."

"While I would love to keep you around, son, you should study abroad." That haunted look came into his eyes again. "Life is the great teacher. It's a cliché, I know, but it's true. Seeing other cultures and making new friends will be good for you."

Arhul was not unaccustomed to his father's lectures, though it had been some time since he'd had one, and sitting with him now while deliberating over an unknowable future after having barely accomplished an unbearable task made him feel oddly nostalgic for his younger years. "I appreciate what you're saying, but what does this have to do with my blistered hands, aching knees, and sense of dread?"

That elicited a laugh. "It's a father's job to teach his son about the world. Consider this a hard lesson." When Arhul didn't respond, he continued, "What made these weeds different from others you've pulled before?"

"They're all connected to an underground network of thick roots that go on for… I don't know, a long way. You'd have to dig up the whole field to get at the parent root, or maybe use toxic chemicals, since natural pesticides don't work on them, and both of those options would defeat the whole purpose and just introduce new problems. And if the roots extend farther out or go deeper still…"

"They'll just keep returning," his father confirmed, "sooner or later. We suspected as much." At seeing his son's accusing glare, he conceded, "Yes, Stern and I tried to tackle this last year without much success. You did better than us."

"That's cold comfort."

"So tell me, what's the solution?"

"I don't know," Arhul admitted. "It seems an awful waste of time to spend a week of every year pulling them. It's a hateful task."

"Are you saying there is no solution?" Ormond pressed.

"By the time you see the plants, the root system is deeply embedded and spread out. The only way is to dig with a machine and rip it out. But that means destroying all the good plants. And if there happens to be a house above it… I honestly don't know."

"Neither do I," Ormond admitted. "But that doesn't mean there isn't one. Perhaps we don't have to resort to *destroying* the good plants but transplanting them instead."

Arhul stayed silent, trying to puzzle out the larger meaning of this. He knew there had to be one, or his father wouldn't have made him go through all this trouble.

"So the weeds are a metaphor?"

His father nodded. "Some can be plucked out relatively easily, and in those cases only vigilance is required to ensure they're dealt with before they grow out of hand. But others, like this kind, creep in unnoticed, sprawling far and wide before they even reveal themselves. You could spend your entire life striving to eradicate them, but if you're expecting victory, that will only lead to bitterness and frustration."

"You could've just told me that and saved me the last few days," he added, wondering if this object lesson was one of the recent *eccentricities* his mother said his father had been picking up of late.

"If I had, you'd have thought about it for a few seconds and then forgotten it. Now that you've experienced it firsthand, you won't so easily forget."

"I get that, but if I'd known they were going to come back, I'd have…"

"Not done it? Gone easier? Sometimes it's best *not* to know the extent of the battle. The fact is, you *did* harm them, and that will keep them from spreading further sooner."

"That sounds like a paradox. I *hate* those! In other words, if we do nothing, they keep spreading faster and further, but if we fight, we're in danger of wasting our lives in vain."

"That's pretty much the substance of it."

"So *that's* why ignorance is bliss!" Arhul groused. "Are you saying that I'm in danger of doing this? Of striving to stop something that can never be stopped?"

"You have a good heart, son, and a sense of justice. Those are the best traits a father could hope for in his child. But the galaxy has become… *dangerous… dark* even. The heart of the Empire is rotten through and through. *Evil* has deep roots and two things that most of us don't have: abundant power and resources. To survive, our compassion and justice have to be kept in balance, or we'll burn out… or worse. I know you've been leaning towards journalism. If so, you're going to encounter a lot of injustice and oppression, and with that, opposition by those who would continue to see evil flourish."

"I thought I shouldn't know the extent of the battle," Arhul quipped. Ormond looked wryly at him. "*Another* paradox! So you think I should choose a different path?"

"I think you should do whatever your gut tells you to do. No matter what, your mother and I will be proud of you. But if you choose one of the harder roads, and that is a noble thing, just remember the lesson you learned today and the importance of balance. You have to seek out the light even if all around you seems to be in darkness. Besides that, you're not the only one fighting. Perhaps the solution is to join with others… or to recognize that battles must be fought but the war is bigger than just you and your generation."

"In other words, evil can never be rooted out, not truly. It'll be with us forever."

"I don't know about *forever*… But there are evils that are so deeply entrenched that none can root them out… well, perhaps only the Supreme Maker can."

Arhul laughed despite himself. "Sorry, I just never took you as the religious type. Is this a new thing?"

Ormond grinned. "There was much that I dismissed when I was younger and thought myself smarter than I actually was. Now, as I grow older, my perspective has changed. I see value in things that I thought had none and worthlessness in things I thought had much. If you'll put up with one more piece of advice for the day: never stop asking questions, seeking truths, or challenging narratives, especially if the narratives are the status-quo. Always remember the old saying, 'Those who forsake truth for power often use power to conceal the truth…'"

Five years would pass, and everything would be different.

Arhul had gone on to become a journalist and educator. His work was regarded as brave. He hadn't yet crossed the line into sedition, but he was skating ever closer to it. Lysium had become a talent agent, representing several up-and-coming artists of diverse musical styles, including the band Urth, the first of the Heavy Isotope bands whose recording, "Neurosis," sailed to the top of the Galactic Top 1,000. As their annual family holiday had been postponed several times due to scheduling conflicts, Ormond suggested they combine it with his Day of Days and make it a working vacation.

Arhul set up a meeting with the Free Sludir movement on Sluudren to report on the oppression they were suffering under the Empire. After that, they would vacation on the nearby water world of Vaynai, where Arhul knew he could do an additional story on the political corruption there. Everything went well enough, but after interviewing the Sludir, Arhul returned to the luxury resort where his family was staying and announced to them that he wanted to do more to bring attention to the atrocities of the Empire. He wanted to aid the Rebel Alliance. Lysium shot him an angry look and left the room. Ygraine remained still. She looked suddenly fragile to him, and he could sense her disquiet. Ormond stared long at his son before nodding soberly. "We understand."

After leaving Vaynai, things took a turn for the worse. Their private yacht was pursued and hijacked by a Zygerrian slave ship. He and his family were roughly packed in with other soon-to-be-slaves, many of whom were sick or injured. His family went into action. They'd smuggled out a substance from Vaynai called Slick which healed like Narco-mist, Ceela, and Bacta but with a hallucinogenic element that for those in pain acted as an analgesic. When the Zygerrians discovered it, they took it for themselves.

No one ever said it. Perhaps they hadn't even thought it. But Arhul couldn't help but wonder if the presence of a journalist on Sluudren—*his* presence—was the reason this had happened. Had someone reported him to an Imperial official who then contacted the Zygerrians? It didn't make sense; it wasn't like he worked for the *Freedom Fighter Feed*! He'd never know the answer, but the question would haunt him for many days to come.

Some time passed, but they were rescued. It seemed later like a holovid, but back then his liberators weren't famous. Han Solo tricked the slavers into believing the *Millennium Falcon* was an Imperial task force, causing the Zygerrians to jump ship. Arhul was fascinated by Chewbacca. With the help of Solo's translations, he got a firsthand account of the enslavement the Wookiees suffered under Imperial law. Despite his guilt, Arhul was determined to write his next article on Kashyyyk. Solo, meanwhile, had discovered the treasure the smugglers had been forced to leave behind and, surprisingly, distributed it amongst the freed slaves before tasking Arhul to pilot the slaver's ship back to Vaynai where they could take shuttles back to their homeworlds.

Once that was accomplished, they returned to Chandrila and sold the Zygerrian ship to Rolf's Emporium. His parents considered it all a grand adventure, and even his sister seemed inspired by it, though she chose to spend a few additional weeks on Chandrila to rest up, saying that she could work from there. Arhul would only stay a week, intent on going to the Lerct Historical Institute to resume teaching, learn Shyriiwook, and, after getting assurances from his family to publish his piece on the Sludir, release what would likely be deemed a "seditious" article.

What no one knew was that the Zygerrians had placed a hidden tracking device on their ship in the event that they were ever forced to relinquish it. A few days after Arhul

left Chandrila, the Zygerrians tracked their ship to the Emporium. Upon procuring information from Rolf as to who sold it to him, they killed the trader, took back their vessel, and came to the Hextrophon residence looking for their treasure.

Arhul would ever afterwards obsess over the following events.

From what the authorities surmised, when his family couldn't produce the treasure that had been given away, the Zygerrians shot and killed Ormond, Ygraine, and Lysium in cold blood. Timon Stern had survived only because he lived in a separate house at the back of the property, which they hadn't seen. He'd spotted the crude-looking ship and, fearing the worst, contacted the constabulary. They arrived in time to arrest the slavers but not in time to save the family. Once the Chandrilan authorities provided ironclad evidence of murder to the Imperial governor, the slavers were summarily executed.

A year later, Arhul resigned from his post, returned to Chandrila, bequeathed the estate to Stern, and returned to Sluudren to speak again with the leaders of the Free Sludir movement. The article he'd published made him a minor celebrity amongst them. Upon his request, they put him in touch with the Rebel Alliance, where he came to meet fellow Chandrilan, Mon Mothma. She hadn't known his family, but she took a liking to Arhul and asked him to accompany her on various trips to and from Coruscant, grooming him and several others she brought along for roles they could fill in the burgeoning Rebellion. She also confided in him things that only a fellow Chandrilan would understand. Mon Mothma was a bright light in a dark time, and he attributed to her his success in healing from the despair that threatened to swallow him whole.

"My father once taught me that some evils were like a kind of weed that could never be rooted out, for they'd spread too long undetected." He told her this one day as they sat comfortably in her suite, sipping Sienta tea and discussing treason and tyranny. "If this Palpatine is a Sith Lord as you believe, then that sounds like one of them."

"Your father was right," she replied after a moment's thought. "But the Empire itself is a construct, one built on a foundation of violence and lies, but a construct no less. And those can be torn down. It won't happen overnight, and it won't happen without violence, but it's happened before. The Sith are not invincible, though they've gone to great lengths to convince everyone otherwise. If we can defeat or drive them back underground, we'll have brought peace to countless trillions."

"And when they return again?"

"*That* battle will be for *another* generation," she said with a faraway look, but to it she added a faint smile, "hopefully long years in the future—if at all."

"You're hinting at old prophecies." Arhul thought back wistfully to better days. "So did my father. But how do you reconcile your belief in the Maker with violence?"

"I don't do so lightly." Mon Mothma's gaze reminded him too much of his father's. He hadn't understood then why he'd had that look. He did now. "I've examined this from every angle and cannot see another way. Nevertheless, we risk becoming another Empire if we are not exceedingly cautious. It is for this reason that I am wary of others who hold only vengeance in their hearts; such ones have no regard for the collateral damage they do. If *we* are to be different, *that* must be what marks us as different. If we're to clear the garden, we must learn to distinguish between the wildflowers and the weeds."

BOOK IV
THE FIRST SHADOW

"It came to me in a vision a long time ago. I saw all the nations strengthening not in wisdom but in their vulgar passions with the will to destroy. I saw the power of the machine multiplying until a single weaponized man matched a whole army. I saw a time when Humans, exalting in the technique of murder, raged so hotly over the world that every good book and treasure was doomed to destruction. This vision was so vivid and moving that I determined to gather together all the things of beauty and culture that I could preserve here against the doom toward which the world is rushing."

~*Guardians of the Flame,* by High Prelate Sevend Tesrek

"Next to the fabulous forces that rose and fought and crashed, Mankind was but a mass of tiny, frightened grasshoppers hopping about beneath battling colossi. Yet one must remember that it was those very same grasshoppers, embittered, insane men who first unleashed all of that ancient terror upon us, reigniting an age-old cosmic feud to flare out in galactic war, planets struggling with planets in titanic combat, immense, unthinkable…."

~*The Damned Monolith,* by Jedi Master Damien Holt

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

THE EMPYREAN WARS

As infinite and manifold as are stars in the sky, so too are the stories that could be told of the epochal Cosmic Wars in that ancient and long-forgotten age. Were they to be recorded, the number of valiant deeds, adventures, and tragedies of these times could fill a library, for their echoes resound in nearly all places today, even if only in fragments recalled in hoary myths, romances, and legends.

Splendid Ap had aided in the construction of arcane vehicles and vessels fashioned as fearsome birds of prey to soar above targeted worlds, or as pelagic monsters to course through oceans, or as insectile crawlers to stalk across febrile fields. Cold Danda Sine had brought forth bizarre and baroque barges with a powerful array of weapons. Tilotny had summoned giant dragonflies, colossal wasps, and others who could serve as escorts and scouts. The Architects were aware of Hyperspace but rarely concerned themselves with it, as interstellar gates were yet in abundance.

Now Tilotny floated alongside Cold Danda Sine and Splendid Ap before the windows to the worlds of Illathurion where she appeared as a giant amongst giants: "Foul spawn of the deep void, brood of the dire and comfortless gulfs, you have been brought forth into this realm with a purpose. Obey me and rule as vassal kings and queens upon the glorious worlds that have been denied you. Disobey me or follow others, and I will turn you into heaving offal for the ravenous hordes that now serve you! Go forth now in the names of the Architects! Begin with the worlds that had come to us for aid. Abet any who will fight alongside us in our Great Rebellion! Rule any who welcome it, but compel them to war! Of those who accepted our offer but will not now fight or submit, employ force until they do!"

Ap opened the Infinity Gates of the Kwoth through which atramentous armies poured. Sine spun open portals in the Khadaji Singularity in the Corridan sector of the Core, the Sebaddon Black Hole and the Tyus Cluster in the Mid Rim, the Hellhoop and the Rugaro Dark Zone in the Expansion Region; the Endor Gate, the Black Hole of Quintas, the Moshaw Dark Star in the Outer Rim; and Entropy's Edge in the Unknown Regions, which came to be orbited by the Plunder Moon. But Sine's favorite black holes were the sentient ones, the Ultimas, such as the invidious Face of Space, or the Eaters as they were called by the few who had the misfortune of encountering one. Through such windows were sent entire planets and satellites populated with deadly armies, but of the altered races and hybrids, Sine transported them back to their ancestral worlds. Dreadful Orbs were also used to open portals on desirable worlds that lacked gates or had had them removed. Also, the Great Web of Atlachnacha secretly extended to Urthha at this time. To protect Otherspace, Filar-Nitzan served as guards as well as early burrowers of hyperspace routes and corridors.

Thargorograht was the craftiest of the Old Ones, and it was to her that Tilotny gave authority over campaign strategies and the movement and distribution of forces. In the methodical mind of the Night Queen, the galaxy was divided into a mammoth web, an auxiliary spiral of frame and radial threads upon which to coordinate attacks. For the present, she focused on ensuring the armies of the Architects were at least evenly matched against their opponents, sending appropriate combatants to the many different worlds to establish dominance over the races that dwelt there and to build bases of operation from which they could more easily be sent to other arena.

The hierarchical order of a hive would have better allowed for a quick and decisive victory but, save for her considerable insectoid infantry, most could not so readily be organized. In time, she would figure out a means of unifying them; until then, she had to factor in those entities that would best serve as agents of chaos.

Such was the case with Typhojem. Untrammeled power and rage, his was a force she would not normally have employed, but he would more quickly bring about their aims. Typhojem had the Xothians and Zanibar on Xoth sent to the Outer Rim and the Yevetha on New Xoth sent to pollute the Koornacht Cluster, then called God's Temple, near the Deep Core. When he had finished disseminating his hordes, Typhojem went forth to remake the galaxy in his image. She knew the Architects would rein him in if he strayed too far or tried to target those Humans for which he held a special hatred, for he never forgot that Tilotny wore a Humanlike shape and wished to kill him, but the Night Queen would have to keep an eye on him just in case.

Of the Architects' many invaders, conquerors, and traitors that fought in the Cosmic Wars, these are but a small sampling: the Koorivar, Baragwin, Yam'rii, Iotran, Bitthævrian, Makurth, Chevin, Yinchorri, Ailon, Kobok, Coynite,[50] Kaleesh, Dashade, Tyluun, Avogwi, Tunroth, Ghawem, Zexx/Esoomian, T'surr, Annoo-dat,[51] Mugaari, Aramandi, Draag, Gacerite, Borzog, Muldren, Bormterran, Apshaidian,[52] Somnian, Tzikk, Drovian, Laboi, Chiggnash, Kerestian, Tarc, Aar'aa, Trunsk, Wetakk, Mephitisian, Tikiarri, Children of the Sleeper, Nediji, Thisspiasian, Omera, Sentran, Yekub, Dimean, Volge, Stellan, Eitak, Orfite, Rakata, Clantaani, Worrite, Moogan, Sawal, Hutlarian, Tholian, Grysk, Monduth, Kilmaulsi, Xon, Ka'hren, Dug, Necryn, Kriken, J'hagga Ri Kachatki, Uukaablian, Muza, Sedonian, Ab'Ugartte, Hiitite, Oni, Sanyassan, Yevethan, Aeolian, M'onnok, Visk,[53] Gloovan, Lamproid, Ebranite, Krish, Gerrn, Qhalla, Medusæ, Lortan,[54] Andaxi, Malagarrian, Swokes Swokes, Vollick, Inchichtok, Krikthasi, Bovorian, Farang, Waroot, Huralok, Seyugi, Krozurbian, Muttani, Psadan, Myneyrsh, Bah'r Tork, Kilido, Gorach, Arakacian, Oumni, Drukathi, Xorg, Mongdoolian, Orz, Druug and several reptilian races of the Endless Empire.

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[50] Who hunted with their Tangak pets.
[51] T'surr and Annoo-dat are related; the former are blue four-armed and four-eyed; the latter are brown skinned with tails who for a time took the moniker *Zoa'mon* after the wormlike slavers.
[52] Named for Splendid Ap.
[53] After being driven from Viska in the Tolaniisi System, they fled to Rordak.
[54] The marauders that came to live in the Colonies were called the Lontar.

In the maddening rush to battle, the Ancient Ones set loose into Skyriver the demons of the Charnel Worlds and many who had been genetically engineered in the horrid chambers of viscera by the Dark Powers. Thargorograht did not know these entities and assumed they belonged to her siblings or the Architects. The crossbreeds and cambion races the Enemy sent into the fray were sapient, sentient, and undead monsters called the Rozzum, though they did not at this time have this name and were called various things by various peoples. They went forth solely to bring death and horror, preying as much on the armies of the Architects as on the peoples of Skyriver.

Amongst them were the Maldont,[55] Durgolosk, Aga, Subteroth, Rathtar, Altagak, Bandigo, Kintan Strider, Slar, Wampir,[56] Trompa, Gorax,[57] Terroga, Shenbit Bonecrushers, Gundark, Khom Destroyers, Tangak, Doashim, Faruun, Minorians,[58] Thota, Kheilwar, Ogre, Fog Creature, Xyrass, Cavernmouth, Durkii, Maungur, Scatalpen, Fleshborer, Drouk, Sneevel, Hornagaunt, Tarasque, Ucursian, Gellbeast, Sarlacc, Divvik, Fanned Rawl, Imbat, Nightshrike, Ecothom, Orgon, Terbeast, Bezoar, Xinkra, Galladian, Akul, Rek, Wurrek, Piscator, Arion, Maritima, Sasori, Gyaos, Clados, Garthok, Snogar, Coromon Headhunter, Siringana, Draagax, Ultaarian, Ro hypa, Tumnor, Kerkoiden, Habogad, Jawenko, Ipisestec, Urcaninus, Quamin, Armadid, Danchaf, Trollbane, Marsh Wyrm, Merdeth, Roggwart, Gorgodon, Minatum, Chuga, Thaed, X'Cal, Emkl Phantom, Graaa'shad, Grue, and others nameless entites such as the disembodied tentacles, the amorphous beings nicknamed Slugs; the thing that came to Aaris III; the Charybdis Devourers; the Light-Emitting Demons; the sapient planet Phaze; the Dire Lurkers, and the vicious bacterial hivemind called the Whole.

Although cruelty bred all in dark Illathurion, not all became cruel—for neither the Architects nor the Ancient Ones could take away a being's free will—and many, seeking only to survive, dispersed across the galaxy to hide and start life anew, with some who took a neutral position in the wars that followed, such as the Advozse, Poss'Nomin, D'amarans, Hyperbolarians, Filordi, Kulless, Adnerem, and Adarians (who displaced a near-Human species of cloners who fled to Jinnorseel, while their Adar pets cleansed Omiddelon III). And some even joined the Allied Races, such as the Khil, two-headed Geex, Leniuzh, and Kian'thar, who, along with the Morses, Gotals, Riilebs, and Gados, served as mediators, ambassadors, and diplomats for a time until the Twilight Wars erupted and the Kian'thar went into seclusion on Shaum Hii.

BELLA SIDEREA

The Architects may have seemed odd and foolish to some of the vulturine forces that served them, but this was an impression they fostered, as it served their purposes for others to underestimate them; and this reality was sometimes learned the hard

[55] Of which there are the Akaans ("Harpies"), Stenax ("Phalanx"), and Orcus ("Hellspawn").
[56] Violent hybrid Akurians now known as Wampas and Roscopores.
[57] Gorax are mutant Yunu.
[58] Variants include the Eniram and Zorodot which hail from the Minotaur system. Though they look similar, they should not be confused with the more peaceful Taurids of Arigadeen, a Ka'aa offspring.

way by those who stepped outside of the parameters the Architects had set for them. Nor did Tilotny have much faith in her so-called offspring, save for Thargorograht, who was motivated by a zealous drive to greatness not unlike herself. That she was ambitious to exalt her ever-expanding offspring was to be expected. Once Tilotny held the galaxy proper, she would bequeath Illathurion to her as a reward. At that time, she would send her throngs against the proscribed worlds ruled by the mysterious archons. Yet, events were moving more rapidly than she'd anticipated. Perhaps it was *they* she should have attacked first while yet they were in an embryonic stage, while yet their power was limited. But the Eldritch Powers kept a veil over their workings and that of their most important subjects, and Tilotny suspected they might overplay their hand and reveal to her a hitherto undiscovered weakness.

Along with the vast legions she kept in reserve, Tilotny did not allow Mnggal-Mnggal and the Kindred of Ooradryl passage out of Illathurion—and Ap was commanded to seal the gates. She went to some lengths to assure them that they were to serve as her rearguard defense in the event of an attack by unseen enemies, but the truth was she did not trust their hunger and seething malevolence. And they knew it too, but Ooradryl conceded obsequiously and flew off with his lot to plot their escape.

"Let the Kindred do what they will," Sine advised. "Their power is dependent on the fools who worship them."

"And what of the peoples who serve us? Are they *fools* as well?"

"Not if you give them what you promised…"

Mnggal-Mnggal could not cross the stars of his own volition; he required a ship or gate to do so. Parts of him could be summoned by the arcane efforts of black science, but he himself could not depart one domain for another without some external means of support, for Splendid Ap had had the foresight to take precautions with this one.

Floating over to Splendid Ap in the form of a stellating star enneagon, its center circle turned into an Apollonian Gasket in which six eyes surrounded a maw of many teeth, he said, "O Radiant Apu, on what aberrant appointment do you depart?"

"What is it you seek from me?" Ap replied coldly.

"No great thing, my bountiful Appellation… merely some apterous passage to a densely populated world… Why, great Aporgomon, do you hesitate in bestowing to me my rightful appanage? Mayhaps you concern yourself with upright matters now that you have expunged yourself of a certain *appendage*?"

"That is my own affair." Splendid Ap considered whether he intended this as a double meaning. Ap had until recently followed the leadings of Tilotny before determining that he'd learned all he could under her tutelage. Wishing to experience a higher state, he removed a part of himself that he no longer deemed useful: *apathy*. Now that he was absent of it, something resounded within, something that some would call a conscience. But was Mnggal-Mnggal referring to this or something else?

"Think, Solemn Apparitor, upon the sybaritic Human race. Do their prey not watch for them aprowl, they who kill as a pastime, decorating their homes with bits and parts? Ask yourself, my Alpha Apodis, do they not oppress and obliterate one another on the orders of their approved leaders? Are they not captivated by the shadows within and without, for which reason even the Celestials proclaim them appalling? Consider

this, bright Ap Star: is it not *my* right to kill and consume those lesser than me without pathos for their pathetic lives? In observation, am I not far more appealing? Perhaps I have been appointed as apothecary to put an end to their pyrexia, and if so, am I not but apropos to nature, the magnum opus of the universe?"

"Sophistry cannot bend truth."

"And what truth would that be, my Apa?"

"The antithesis of nature is what you are, a devouring cancer."

"Brilliant Apollinaire, you have always been apragmatic, with an appetite for knowledge no less than mine!" The mouth of the Devourer turned upward in a disturbing smile before his whole form melted into that of a heaving blob of eyes and puckering mouths: "Indeed, many great minds have I approached from beyond, and many have I influenced, and *great* were the works they produced!"

Splendid Ap was regarded by his peers as a great intellect, if not a particularly wise one. He did not know if that had changed, only that this entity thought himself cleverer than all others. He was not. "The greatest artifice and ersatz history from beyond the realms tainted by mendacity is of no more interest to me than the slurry of the mines, sewers, and mist-enshrouded bogs."

"Clever apothegm, my most excellent Apastamba! Here is another: rashness is the tenancy of youth, is it not? And mendacity the silver tongue of great art! Now, tell me, thou who claim no dissimulation: how fares thy hidden trove, that constant and irrational offspring of thee? Know that just as *you* know the secret truth of my past *and the begotten Ap-hoth of whence I came… I know of your hidden pith*—!"

If Splendid Ap was surprised, he didn't betray it. "You are not incognizant of the fact that I can retract the days so that you no longer present a threat."

The quivering, protoplasmic mass laughed. "You cannot use such apriorism, apoplectic Apsu, for you would already have done so had your apotropaic *moral compass* not weighed heavily on your slant-height! It no longer allows you to bend time and space to your now wingless will! That is why those without such an impractical encumbrance will always prevail."

Splendid Ap conceded. "I have not been without stain… Very well. There must be an end to madness." Ap transported Mnggal-Mnggal to an uninhabited world he called Mortigan, bending space around it so it could not readily be breached by his allies; it would later be called Mugg Fallow, its nomenclature a corruption of the name of the hateful Devourer and inspiration for the name of the Huttese god Mog.

Mnggal-Mnggal knew that Splendid Ap would try to trick him and had earlier left behind a few small pieces of himself—tiny pustules that grew on the flesh of some of the lifeforms considered lower in Illathurion, which would be overlooked. As they were consumed, they would bloat and swell into a mass of revolting tissue, pulsing entrails, and many eyes, and so would he begin to spread. In this way would *offspring* forms of Mnggal-Mnggal, who were really just extensions of his mind, come about, feeding and gathering knowledge. For now, the Devourer would wait until he could find a means off Mortigan. No protective shield could hold him forever.

CONCLAVE OF THE FIRSTBORN

Under the auspices of the great Sicmoo leader, Bezwik Clak'dor, the Firstborn Council invited the heads of all the Elder Races to preside on Baraka, a world in the Deep Core that later came to be known as Had Abbadon. Fierce were the early debates of the Conclave of the Firstborn, for fear and retribution had entered the hearts of the Council, as did pride, and four major factions were delineated at this time:

The Resolute represented the faction loyal to the ways of the Celestials. These would not engage in violence but agreed to procure methods of nonlethal defense for their worlds and others.

The Judicious were the branch determined to fight any and all galactic threats. They would also be known as the Allied Races.

The Renegades numbered those who forsook all former familiar bonds to join with the enemy forces.

Finally, the Renunciates had chosen to withdraw from fellowship with all others.

Amongst the Judicious there were disputes as to methods and means to deal with the Enemy. Should they engage in preemptive strikes? What should they do with injured enemy combatants? Should they accept peace accords with enemy forces if it meant allying with the Architects? What should the policy be towards Humans? Noncombatants? Non-sapient creatures? For their part, the Kwoth were dismayed to know that their gates had been put to such egregious use, and it cost them their once intimate friendship with the Gree. In shame, the Kwoth renamed themselves the Kwa and resolved to somehow make amends. The Gree did not blame them for trusting the Architects, but rather for not destroying the Infinity Gates as soon as the false Celestials were revealed. And it did not go unnoticed that the Infinity Gates on Kwa worlds had been tweaked so that they could be utilized as weapons should any hostile force threaten them.

In the midst of their arguments, the Resolute argued for peaceful resolutions wherever possible. The Asogians were amongst the most gentle of their numbers, and they reminded their brethren that nearly all of the Elder Races had powers that could subdue attackers without the use of deadly force. Unfortunately, by this point, the Judicious—led by the Eruthros representative, Warth Jek Annonic—had grown tired of the argument, having heard the Diathim already make a particularly impassioned speech on the subject. While a few sided with that perspective, most remained unconvinced, particularly now that they were seeing malevolent Dragons and hostile forces emerging across various worlds. And word of shapeshifters had reached their ears, further complicating matters.

Nevertheless, the Asogians patiently revealed to their more impatient colleagues their intent to develop a nonviolent means of repelling those who might come to their worlds with evil intent.

"If I correctly grasp how affairs are managed on Vomestra, this sounds like a rather lengthy process," Clak'dor said, shaking his head in doubt. "I mean no offense, of course, but Asogians are exactly not known for their celerity."

"It *will* take time to grow the necessary elements," Jannoa, the Asogian delegate, explained. "However, working together, we can bring it about quicker. Once we have developed a successful prototype from the biologicals on our world, we can transplant them to each of yours and cultivate equivalent ones. The plant-life throughout the galaxy is a marvel of ingenuity; put to benevolent uses, they will astound you."

"Do not condescend to us as if we are of the lesser races," balked the Muun representative, Spirem Argon. "We know all about this."

Voices raised in censure at the arrogance of the Muun and his use of that term.

"Now, now, Spirem," reasoned Annonic, his cheek tendrils lifting up with the look of feigned embarrasment he wore on his brick red face. "Let us give our colleagues the opportunity to present their case." He stroked one tendril now as he added, "We should hear *all* ideas before deciding on the wisest course to follow."

"Considering all of the many *younger races* that exist," interjected the Siniteen representative, Conjo Nt'tossh, sharply correcting Argon while addressing the Asogian's proposal, "what you propose would still take decades at the earliest. By that time, the Architects will have left us nothing but ravaged worlds!"

"And even then," the Q'rel Ascendent, Kel'tarcPei, chimed in, taking up the argument, "can you guarantee that this biotech will also repel destructive blasts like the one that destroyed Alashan?"

"We cannot," Jannoa acknowledged. "At this time, all we know is that we can bio-engineer a system to repel evil forces, but we cannot say with any certitude what we *or you* might additionally be able to produce that will defend us from long-range attacks… though it should be noted that the conversion technology to turn Infinity Gates into weapons is extremely complex. Even the Kwa have admitted their uncertainty as to how it was achieved by the Humans on Pax."

Kel'tarcPei made a dismissive sound. "If the Humans did it, it's only a matter of time before others do as well." Several shook their heads sadly, ready to move on to other matters. The Asogian plan was rejected in favor of quicker methods proposed by other races. The Judicious, who numbered thirty Precursor races at this time, decided they would construct their own weapons and defenses and share them with one another and their offspring races. They would begin testing in the deep and desolate rifts of the planet Koronis. This was not met with the approval of all, and some had even expected the Council's permission to call upon the Architects for weaponry, since it had been Onrai who had warned them of dangerous hordes from beyond, but that had been soundly rejected by the majority. These recalcitrant Firstborn, nevertheless, professed assent until they returned to their homeworlds and proceeded to summon the Architects. So did the number of Renegades and Renunciates grow.

So was a bad example set for the many younger races. Star Temples across the galaxy overflowed with blood sacrifices as a multitude of civilizations requested "gifts" from the Architects, which came in the form of physical enhancements, pyramidal holocrons with the keys to advancements, bizarre machines, weapons, and the ability to engineer predatory beasts from the local fauna to serve as protectors and guards.

Those who were known to accept aid from the Architects were barred from participation in the Council. Worse, the fall of some offspring races caused their parent races to mistrust of all their offspring. Similarly, the fall of some Firstborn races caused their offspring to doubt their progenitor race. So did the Resolute shrink.

The Sicmoo (later known as Bith) crafters had many years earlier bio-engineered the Teezl, an energy-based hive-mind that had been utilized as a communications device for the omnifarious races across the stars. Now, in the approaching storm of war, the Teezl would serve in that capacity and as a potent jamming device.

To fuel division and sever communication between the Allied Races and their growing number of opponents, Tilotny—who had eyes and ears at the Council meetings by means of her shapeshifters—saw to it that the ancient Precursor language spoken by the Judicious, Renegades, Renunciates, and her own forces was changed to multifarious tongues; at the same time, she commissioned Ap to fashion a new trade language by which her allies could yet communicate and coordinate.

Seeing no need to invent a new language when so many old ones from the Primary Dimension were yet available, Ap simply transposed an ancient tongue to Skyriver. He called it Ap'iru, and despite Tilotny's intent, it came to be adopted by many of the Allied Races. The Rozzum later came to adopt ur-Kittât, the blackened speech of Sithlan from the ancient Prime World, though many were taught to use Ap'iru and the Universal tongue of the Humans as well.

The complex trajectory of Universal and Basic down the ages was touched on by Doctor Milanda Vorgan, Associate Professor of Xenolinguistics at the University of Charmath. What is known is that with the formation of several ancient pre-Republic governments that united systems across sectors and regions, such as the Federated Stars centered on Canopus and the Galactic Federation of Worlds on Pax, the Human languages of the Earthworlds, and especially Notron, spread Universal, turning it into the Old Galactic Standard. During the Alsakan Conflicts, it went further, taking over from Ap'iru and other regional trade languages (though not entirely), where it melded with the common non-Human trade languages that had gained traction. Many millennia after disseminating across ten thousand and more vistas by those fascinated by this race that seemed to have appeared from nowhere, it was established as the Galactic Standard that is known today as Basic. What is now referred to as High Galactic was but a resurrected ancient lingua franca used by the elites to set themselves apart from the common folk.[59]

As the language and script of the Precursors (later called the First Tongue and kept only by those of the Resolute) diminished and was forgotten, save by a few, and the more formal logographic scripts of individual races were unable to gain traction outside of their own peoples, Aurebesh came about from the need to have a common script. Once the Wukkarian philologist, Naicineoph, adapted it for use alongside Basic, it spread quickly until it became ubiquitous.

[59] Ap'iru is most well-known from the characters on Darth Vader's armor. More ancient than Kittat, it is a venerable prophecy of the Celestials that reads: "His deeds will not be forgiven until he merits."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THE SUNDERED OF SKYRIVER

THE JUDICIOUS RESPONSE

In response to the nightmarish wave of invasions striking the galaxy, the physically strong races made a name for themselves. Among the first to volunteer were the offspring races of the Firstborn Xaczhick, which included the Forest Peoples: Wookiees, Toma, Yunu (known also as Paragaran), and Yuzzem; the Jungle Peoples: Kordan (known too as Ma'alkerrites), Calaron, Buzchub, and Bendone (known as Howler Tree People); and the Snow Peoples: Gigoran, Akurian, Tchell, and Talz.[60]

They were accompanied by the Sephi, Nord, Kumumgah, Worxer (known as Spiners), Taurid, Yrashu, Conjeni, Velmoc, Lasat, Tempestro, Feeorin, Nelvaan, Gryphon, Svivreni, Balinaka, Pherro, Armalat, Covallon, Trianii, Merysian, Sogowan (also known as Mantrin), Najib, Brubb, Kentra, Gryps'gar, Pengauani, Nalroni, Isangrim,[61] Ithullan, Talormine, Cragmoloid, ZeHethbra, Equani, Kalaanite, Shatras, Multopos, Ureallian, Cob'bron, Ipharian-Da'Lor, Teirasan, Delrakkin, Varvvan, Peripleen, Aaricetrian, Rigellian, Creons, Luxans, Pinurquian, Sessehsellah, Blemmyae (and their Octopor symbiotes), Sibilaari, Mantellian, Mantellian Savrip, Tarong, Oblee, Sludir, Kyuzo, Nazren, Morling, Audririan, Er'stacian, Shistavanen, Filvian, Pursian, Ukian, Gotiard, Ranth, Murachaun, Saheelindeeli, Houk, Filordus, Herglic, Pendalanorian, and a host of the great Grimalkin races. The Judicious called them the Fighters of Ashla, but others called them Star Warriors after the legendary guardians of the Elder Gods, and they sent them through Hypergates to planets and systems in need.

Ghastly fogs rolled in, concealing horrors beyond comprehension, shadows that prowled the aether of dreams, tempting and terrorizing, while telepathic, skull-headed Etoomveers, who are the Nightmare Demons of Droxine, were stealthily sent before the armies; the scourge of many worlds, they would cloud the minds of their inhabitants, allowing them to be more easily vanquished or driven out. And on Lae Clottis, their nightmares were so effective that the inhabitants tore out their own eyes!

The Delorf and others were sent to counter the adverse effects of the Etoomveers, while construction of the Cosmic Turbines, the earliest of the Engines of Defense, was begun at this time. These immense devices could recalculate and rearrange planetary bodies to make it more difficult for enemy combatants to secretly slip into defenseless systems. The endeavors were time-consuming, but they proved beneficial to those sectors into which they were installed.

The Cosmic Turbines would also be used to overcome the eldritch, techno-organic vessels of the Enemy, bizarre constructs like the Old Machines, sentient monstrosities

[60] The Calaron (or Kaloron) hail from Zandor, the original home of the Zandor Rockers.
[61] These include the Great Wolves of Loth and elsewhere.

built from the tissue and genetic schema of slaughtered combatants. Scholars of millennia hence thought them merely ancient starships, but during the Empyrean Wars they caused the Firstborn to shudder, for they reaped souls, set loose monsters, and transported slaves and gates across the stars.

In the second wave, Thargorograht unleashed the Colossi of Illathurion!

Towering beings descended on the worlds and war-weary masses; tumescent hordes—amorphous and mad—crashed through the wilds; rubbery corpse-grinders reddened the lakes, rivers, and seas. As with the first wave, worlds who allied with them were permitted to join their ranks whereas those who submitted became slaves, and those who resisted faced war and the prospect of death.

In answer to these atrocities, the gargantuan races were sent against them—Star Dragons and Morvaks, Giant Rancors, Aelids, Neebray, Dragon Slugs, Purrgil, Guaishoulo (later called Xiuluo and Zillo Beasts), and others intent on repelling or destroying the gigantic adversaries that now swept through the lands.

Following the example of her mistress, Thargorograht did not send all of her swarms into battle. The Yagai, Fere, and Ig's'z's'zz'sz (or Igzians) were employed as shipwrights, as per their talents. Also, she had not the numbers to overwhelm by force of arms alone, but she discerned that many would be reasonably persuaded to turn by means of enticements, intimidation, and infiltration.

In the third wave, Thargorograht set loose her Nytocris—the collective term for the vast amount of insectoid-and-arachnid races of Skyriver, Illathurion, and the Charnel Worlds that were hers or had been induced to serve her. They came to include the sapient and partly sapient races of the Rakaan, Iknayid, Evarrian, Narjam, Gutkurr, Cratnik, Nightspider, Ovion, Molator, Bator, Targo, Lakran, Nimp, Critokian, Bartokk, Droch, Polwocz, T'zaki, Citlik, Sic-Six, Assemblers, Combat Arachnid, Nalrithian, Flakax, Vashan, Purella, Noehon, Tlönian, Hyallp, Brizzit, Urquan, Cavern Spider, Mantavor, Entymal, Ilwrath, Krytollak, Tognath, Sikurdian, Amengi, Colicoid, Kobok, Abersyn symbiotes, Nevoota Bee, Arachne, Spidren, Rachni, Kamarian, Hiromi, Sooman, Dark Nest, Nivx "Shadowmen," Lylek, Worluk, Taurill, Galagans, Rigerians, Klendathnids, Cree-va, and more. Swarming through civilization after civilization, the Nytocris burned through orchards, farms, and fields.

The Judicious sent Araquia, Karrans, Killiks, Qieg, and Ychthytonians to protect valuable food sources while the Kwa sent their spiderlike brood, the Kwath, to turn foes to their cause, for always there were more benevolent races in the galaxy than malevolent ones, and swiftly they raced to end the onslaught of the Night Queen.

As seemingly endless daemoniac things alighted on cities of their choosing, declaring themselves emperors and emissaries of the gods, the Firstborn Council was overwhelmed, and their inability to provide relief to so many afflicted sectors caused resentment, dissension, secession, and scattering divisions. Many begrudged the Renunciates for hiding or destroying their technology so that the opposition might not use it, while the Resolute were castigated for refusing to take up arms and protect their kin. Yet for all the rogue factions that came about from this, many sectors were yet left to their own devices and forced to fight or seek help wherever they might.

The Earthworlds were not spared either. Urthha would see a mass invasion led by the Sarmaks and one of the giant mutant Uror serpents and his slaves. Without

awareness of the larger galactic war, some blamed opposing nations, other planets in the system, or even mutations caused by cosmic rays. But these incursions were covered up by the ravenous governments and called hoaxes. But later on, Humans would join the fray… *on both sides of the conflict*.

DREAMERS IN THE STARS

With the galaxy becoming fragmented, mistrust took over where once friendship reigned, and numerous sectors, systems, and worlds became independent states proclaiming their individual sovereignty… But always there was a price to pay.

Several cosmic entities came forward at this time who did not agree with the Celestials' preordained course of peace. The Endless Speakers they were called, or the Great Ones, for they were the gods of Oneirichor, but here in the Grand Convocation of the Celestials they were known merely as the Seven. They had come to ask of the Osiarch that they not leave their offspring defenseless in the face of the growing threat. Not content with the answers they'd received, the discussion grew heated.

"You would see them suffer and die?" Lorian charged, dismayed.

"They are transgressors, and this is not the Dreamlands, Nath-Horthath," Wutzek responded with barely concealed annoyance, "or whatever name you are now going by. They *knew* the consequences, and we are governed by higher laws."

"I am known here as Lorian, and our realms are not so dissimilar. You well know that those of you who fashioned this cosmos *could* bend the laws for good cause if you so wished," he retorted.

"*Bend*? To join in warfare would be to *break* the Eternal Decree," Lluxos rejoined, "in defiance of the Supreme Maker!"

Lorian acknowledged the point. "I ask only that you give them the means to defend themselves." The other six remained silent, allowing Lorian to speak for them. For their part, they were a mix of emotions, as was true of their nature.

"Do you think us so naïve that we cannot distinguish the difference between engines of defense and weapons of death?" charged Lluxos.

"To counter the dark denizens of the netherworlds, the latter is *necessary*!"

"And if they get into the hands of the Enemy?" asked Xurz patiently. When Lorian didn't reply, he went on. "To protect against the cunning of the Dark Powers, the Presence has himself called forth Chosen Ones. The Valdilar have raised up the noble line of Benders, Mondoshawan, and other Guardians enhanced by the Whills to serve as Defenders; and to such trusted ones have been distributed Eyes of Clarity, Rings of Light, Elder Signs, distaffs, flaming swords, gilded helms, parchments, and other enhanced crystals, amulets, and objects. But even these are sought after by the Enemy…"

"I fear they will not be enough…" Lorian said, looking off to the stars. "The Realm of Dream borders the Realm of Nightmare. Ever since we arrived there has this been, but now the Outer Darkness is connected, for the Enemy has brought ghouls and demons to populate it, filling it with all the horror generated from the minds of their victims, and this terror and despair feeds the *watching ones*. I can feel the building of currents, the raging abyss eager for release, the whispering dark…"

"For which reason we asked for your aid," Lluxos stated. "It is a spiritual battle that we wage, not of bone and blood, nor of flesh and spleen. If we go beyond what we have already done, what has been permitted by the One Above All, we might as well join in the battle ourselves!"

"Trillions will die…"

"They will die regardless," Xurz stated, "and likely many more. Do you know what transpired when first I gave wings to the Karanthor leaders of the Orovar trapped in the Great Rift Valley? Did they use their new power to lead their people out of the deep canyon to freedom? No, they enslaved their brethren and made war against the Ptoth, their once-peaceful troglodyte neighbors."

"Had our offspring listened and learned," said Wutzek, "they would not be in this predicament. We have given much—but they are not infants. It is not for us to shield them from the consequence of their grievous choices."

"Do not the wicked Malevoiy remain shielded on Andowyne," Lorian charged, "instead of being prisoned as the mad Titans were?"

"As with the Humans, the punishment of the Valdilar is not ours to decide; their fate is veiled from our eyes. All that is known is that they have a role yet to play in the life of the coming Chosen One."

"We might at least restore back to the peoples the full protection they had?"

"And what happens the next time they defy the law?" Marutz asked. "And the time after that? Would you have us fight as their personal shield-maidens? Should we become as house deities, battling one another for lands and resources? No, Lorian, you well know that what you are asking has been tried and failed."

"I ask only for resources so that they might win!" he cried.

"You ask for *indulgence*," Lluxos returned hotly, "and thus straddle the line of defiance. Where is your faith, Lorian? And the rest of you, where is your remembrance? Did you lose it on the Plains of Leng? Does it float down the River Yann? Was it dropped when you danced atop the peak of Ngranek? What you propose will only prolong conflict and suffering—or do you imagine it will be different *this* time?"

Lorian was silent. Everything they said was true. And yet he felt… indignant, emotional, *Human* even….

"Until instructed otherwise," stated Lluxos, "we will not go beyond the Decree."

And so the matter was closed. It did not need to be stated that if the Endless Speakers proceeded in their folly, they would do so at their own peril. Lorian and the six departed from before them, their faces bowed in mixed anger, grief, melancholy, apathy, longing, and contemplation.

"It is not defiance," insisted Lorian, whose temper alternated between resentment and doggedness. "And yet, they are correct about weapons falling into the wrong hands. But what if there was another way? Our offspring cannot know, but we will at least give them a fighting chance. If the Maker can raise up Chosen Ones for the galaxy, why should *we* not as well?"

So as not to openly defy the Osiarch, Lorian and the six transformed their offspring races into half-corporeal, half energy-beings so that they *became* as weapons unto themselves. Only after it had been accomplished did they inform these races what had been made of them and how they had been *elevated*.

The Vhorl, who were squid-like cephalopods, responded with anxious fear, while the Xadow, who were spider-like echinoderms, replied with angry indignation. Others had varying reactions. A few even welcomed it.

Things might have been fine had their new powers not also changed their thinking and behavior. The Vhorl became obsessed with the idea that since they were now ascended to godhood—which they believed to be true because they could now shapeshift—so should they dwell amongst their fellow divinities, and with the abilities gifted them, they began construction on an immense Gateway to the Gods, a Great Gate that would transport them to the Unseen Realm of the Celestials. They convinced the Xadow to aid them in this endeavor. Along with a faction of the Xaxax that they had befriended, they together became known as the Triad, and so would they go on to bring even greater misfortune and suffering into the galaxy.

DECEIVE, INVEIGLE, OBFUSCATE

Independently of each other, astronomers from Duro and Clak'dor VII detected an anomaly. They didn't yet know its implication, but after learning that the same discovery had been made by the other team, they shared the information and pooled their efforts. Their respective elders, who had consulted with the Conclave and been cautioned to have nothing to do with it, told them to leave the anomaly alone for a time until it could better be studied. Disregarding this counsel, they obsessively pursued their goal, delving into abstruse, non-Euclidean geometrics that revealed it to be a window that opened to a hidden dimension. After sufficient planning, they constructed a cannon that would precisely shoot a small vessel into the black heart of that unknown realm. Excitedly did the team of Duro and Sicmoo prepare for the voyage…

The Muun were a secretive and mathematical race who had grown increasingly arrogant while they cloned themselves and experimented on their clones. Believing they could outwit the Architects, as others had attempted, a scientific team embarked on the successful development of devices of unfathomable power that could tear open a hole into the incomprehensible Space between Spaces. But this was merely the whispered order of their true masters on the other side…

The Kaminoan overseer, known as the Suprema, wished to learn more of these Architects whose power was emerging in the universe. If they were the future, he would know of it, and join with it. Determining that he would speak with them personally, he had copious amounts of his attendants' blood spilt. Yet by the time Tilotny arrived, he was long gone. Never the most patient, the Suprema had gone aboard a never-before-seen saucer-shaped ship that he assumed had come for him. Admittedly, he found it somewhat offputting that within it were thirteen tall, spindly-limbed entities with eyes blacker than the void, but by then it was too late…

The days passed like fire clouds gusting fearsomely across burning forests and leas.

Gather your people for the harvest! The entity who had telepathically commanded his captives was identified only as the Interdimensional Being. His subjects did not hesitate to comply, their memories of torture and experimentation as distant as the furthest stars. In their minds, the Interdimensional Beings were the ultimate authority.

The Muun had proved the most successful, for they had been bred in secret for this, introducing a technocracy under the Interdimensional Beings, and a faction of their people were sent out, pretending to escape from their clutches to Paigu, the Lontellae system, and Ton Muund in Pax's sector of the Core Worlds.[62]

The Duro and Sicmoo had no political power, but were able to beguile a number of their people to join, "the Great Endeavor that will revolutionize the galaxy."

Contrarily, the Suprema's efforts were thwarted by the Aiwha, who exposed his true intent, forcing him to return to his masters with only his wife and children. To punish the Kaminoans, they were sent the Suprema's head along with a terrible avatar of the Ancient One that they called the Dark Titan, and he slipped noisomely into their seas.

The arcane insemination procedures that had been performed upon the Duro, Sicmoo, Muun, and Kaminoan, sometimes with the use of a viral compound, resulted in a variety of physically altered and psychically indoctrinated races. Although genetic material introduced from other harvested races, including Humans, produced a range of new types, most bore an odd similarity in appearance. These would be known in the future as the "Grey Ones," though the collective name their cruel masters gave them was the Astatha. As to their individual names, these were self-determined or given by those that encountered them. So came the Xan, the Zetans, Zener, Zeuol, Strieb, Striber, Skolarians, Tellurians, Vri, Varash, Venharis, Reticulans, Roonans, Prin, Frenk, Esphini, Abinyshi, Arilou, H'Harn, Mylnob, Cavaturians, and others.[63]

The Abinyshi were sent to spy on the Core Worlds, but most were sent forth on occluded and insidious missions across the vast universe to abduct, probe, and psychologically enervate their prey. If they were discovered by others besides their targets, and they had the greater numbers, they could kill. Otherwise, they were to portray themselves as neutral or even benevolent beings, mere galactic neighbors.

The hybrids relished their work, with very few ever conceiving of the idea that they could sever the link to their masters, which in some cases required expelling the pure black virus that mentally connected them.

Of the few that did, some escaped, and these sought to hide their origins. Such was the case for the Tellurians who fled to Massula and changed their name to Salarians. Others strove to oppose the Astatha. The Skolarians departed for the third world of the Terra I system to aid the Humans against the so-called "Caponians." The Striber, a water-breathing race, went to the seas of Terra I (until the growing pollution drove them to Julsujod III and later Iskalon). And after the wicked Xan were sent from Xanthiir to a former Sephi world in the Mid-Rim to teach the Dyzan Witches, the dissenting Xan went instead to an Outer Rim world in the Corva sector that they called Xantar, from which they would rename themselves. It was around this time that they began an abiding friendship with the Asogians.

But their former master, well aware of this development, allowed it to play out…

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[62] Claiming to originate from Mysterii and endorsed by the Eruthros and Sicmoo, the Muun wormed their way in due to their brilliant minds, sympathetic situation, and seeming formidability. Ton Muund was an Imperial administrative center for a time.

[63] The Zetans should not be confused with their hybrid Sephi offspring race known as Zedans. Despite resembling the Astatha, the Othalans who originated in Yammsara were an offspring species of the Celegians. *Astatha/Estatha* means "the hinderers," "the unstable ones," and "the nameless ones."

LORDS OF DECEPTION

Some time later, the Interdimensional Being approached the Xantar with an offer of friendship and a story. Cthir—as he referred to himself—claimed to have defected from his cruel cohorts, whom he revealed to be Ssettogians. To prove his motives, he provided them with extensive knowledge and assistance in various matters. For all appearances, Cthir appeared to have repented of his former ways and answered their questions to their satisfaction, explaining that his was a race of scientists from another dimension tasked to create soldiers for the Architects. As his wisdom and aid proved true time and again, the Xantar, yet unaware of his true nature, came to trust him.

In their search for redemption, the Xantar had become fixated on the Celestials and the prophecy of the Chosen Ones and had, by esoteric means, discovered one who dwelt in another far-off dimension. While their Asogian allies were content to let such prophecies unfold naturally, the Xantar were driven by a sense of urgency. So they asked Cthir to spearhead their mission to bring to Skyriver this Chosen One who they called the Son of Hender.

The Lords of Lucidulum who governed Vomestra would not share their knowledge of cross-dimensional travel that the Celestials had granted them long ago in the Earliest Days, for the freedom to traverse the immeasurable breadth, length, depth, and height of the universe—including that of the Primary World—was a boon that few possessed. The Asogians trusted in their connection to the Force more than to appearances, and for ages none discovered their secret of exploring strange realms beyond Skyriver, collecting what plants and wisdom they could…

But the Xantar knew, and they would not be thwarted. Using stealth-tech they'd developed from Cthir's instructions, a Xantar scout ship surreptitiously followed the Asogians' Xrus-Ones (these are the Great Ships of Vomestra), to a hidden place called Nahaz Erdu, translated as the *Whirlpool of Time*. It appeared to be a kind of black hole and was itself concealed within a constellation known as the Path to Immensity. From there, the Ssettogian would lead their fleet to the singular world of the Chosen One!

If Cthir had Human eyes, he would be seen rolling them now. The Xantar's ostentatious display of colorfully blinking ships was not what he preferred. Stealth had always been the way of their kind. But the Xantar explained that they wanted to *attract* Humans to them. While their means were not to his liking, they at least obeyed his directive to bring other Humans with them. Though the Xantar were solely interested in the Chosen One, Cthir convinced them that he could better ascertain if indeed this being *was* the Chosen One by comparing him to several others; also, Human Beings required companionship and were generally happier in groups, and as this reasoning seemed wise to them, they agreed to invite several.

After psychically drawing several promising ones they had watched for a time from afar, this group of Humans gathered upon a mountain that Cthir thought appropriately named the Tower of the Devil, awaiting the arrival of the aliens. The Xantar played a musical refrain as a greeting and invitation to come aboard, and this they subconsciously understood. After the Humans boarded, Cthir closely monitored the object of their obsession, this Son of Hender. Most curiously, he was a descendant of the *very* one who'd first awakened them from their centuries-long slumber when

he restored to them their stolen skull! Perhaps this Son of Hender was a Chosen One after all! He'd already thwarted death on several occasions, including an attack by the InGen Corp's aggressive megalodon clone. This was evidence that he possessed *something*, some ineffable quality that *they* would take and use for their own ends.

By the time the Xantar saw through the Ssettogian's dissimulation, it was too late. Xantar bodies were strewn about, their small necks twisted, their fat bodies impaled, their skinny limbs torn off. The Xantar thought they outnumbered him, but when they tried to overpower him, they discovered there was not *one* Cthir but *thirteen*!

The entity was now gone. Thankfully, the Son of Hender was healthy and intact, but Cthir had left with his genetic seed, taken during one of the man's vivid dream-visions, and he hadn't gone alone. He'd taken one of the scientists they'd brought onboard, the one responsible for the megalodon clone. Cthir had chosen him for his impressive feat on so prosaic a world, a skill Cthir would exploit. With greater resources and focus on genetic samples harvested from Trammis III, altered to become more prone to fear and aggression, the scientist would go on to fashion predators with the potential—should they break loose or be set free—to wipe out the Human race. His work would begin on Terra I. There he began the engineering of creatures long thought extinct.

Crestfallen, the chastened Xantar first brought the Son of Hender to Urthha to do whatever it is that Chosen Ones do. Then they traveled to Vomestra to confess their sins and seek out a way to right the wrong they'd committed. After hearing their full story, the Lords of Lucidulum proved merciful and pardoned them, explaining that their mission had *not* failed, as they'd established this Chosen One in a place where his seed would go on to bring much light to a galaxy starved of it. But they also made it clear that there was never any Cthir or Ssettogians. The Interdimensional Being and forerunner of the Astatha was known by several names, Krath, Ka-rath, Sariel, Zhahar, and Quachil Uttaus who is the Treader of the Dust. Of the Ancient Ones, he was the Lord of Deception and the Ultimate Corruption. They informed the Xantar of this so that they would not feel unduly burdened by guilt, but it impelled them instead to never cease in their search for the means of stopping this deceiver.

But that came at a cost, for he, in turn, sent the necromantic Xan and others to hunt down and slaughter them without mercy. And before that war could end in the genocide of the Xantar, the Asogians gave to them rare access to the World Between Worlds. From there, they traveled to the original homeworld of Humans in ages past to stop the awakening of Zhahar.[64]

Notwithstanding their good intentions, their attempts at stealing the skull of Zhahar or even abducting the archaeologist who would later recover it ended in failure. As they had been told, but could only learn for themselves, history could not be rewritten. Nor could the Ancient Ones be so easily thwarted, for the time to reveal themselves was fast approaching. It would begin with the corrupted seed of the Chosen One, stolen by Zhahar, brought to fruition in the progeny of Seth…

[64] The Altrusians attempted to enter the World Between Worlds without permission, but succeeded only in penetrating a lesser waystation. Though they relocated to this pocket dimension in the hopes of expanding it further, they chose instead to aid fellow pilgrims stranded in this land of lost souls.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

THRALLS OF THE ENDLESS NIGHT

THE PREVARICATORS OF PAX

Kitel Khan, the beloved Monarch of Atrisia, led a small delegation to Pax to meet with the various rulers and ambassadors at the Plenipotentiary Plexus, an annual convention of Human leaders cognizant of the wider galactic events and in league with one another politically or commercially.

But Kitel Khan had come with his own agenda: to learn and assess the nature of these ambassadors as potential allies or adversaries. An excellent judge of character, as he'd been trained by his tutors to be, possessing an eidetic memory and the ability to project an amiable and seemingly guileless nature that made people comfortable when talking with him, he furtively listened to each and every obstreperous fool while he smiled and nodded politely, appearing agreeable and even a little thick.

Knowing the origins of his people would be questioned, Kitel Khan came with a plausible story of his ancestors' migration from Tao in the Outer Rim, and Notron before that, for he wisely chose to conceal the existence of Ravaath. With a stout enough army on Atrisia—as evidenced by the impressive-looking phalanx that he'd arrived with—he didn't have to overworry about the grasping nature of some of his fellow rulers, as there was an abundance of worlds they were salivating to exploit.

Atrisia had had its share of problems, including a secret society hidden within the highest ranks who worshipped the Ancient Nemesis. Upon his discovery of their existence, Kitel Khan's grandfather had acted without delay, arresting and exiling them from Atrisia on a prison ship. As the story went, they were led by a crystalline entity to a world they called Shogun. Shogun was home to a Tholian colony, and together with the exiles they formed a techno-mystical society whose greatest achievement was the forging of giant robot warriors.

Kitel disliked the current leader of Pax. Prime Minister Aargau was a brazenly wicked and corrupt creature, and nearly all of the sycophantic parasites who worked for him were as morally bankrupt. Of those who governed worlds in the Core and abroad, many were simply stupid, willfully ignorant, or craven; most did not even like each other, though their lust for power, prestige, and wealth held them bound.

As for Lord Niall, High Magus of the Sethans, that one was a different beast altogether and considerably more dangerous. Niall came dangerously close to sussing out Kitel's true nature, and had it not been for Kitel's wise sages—who'd added a layer of glamor about him, a little-known spell that projected simple ordinariness—he might have met with trouble. "Perhaps you can help dispel some rumors that have swirled in regard to your people," said Lord Niall unctuously. "It is said that they are not originally from Atrisia. I wonder what world you might actually hail from."

With as much genuineness as he could muster, Kitel said, "There are few who know for certain where Humans first derived. I have heard it said that Pax is this very place. But speaking of rumors, there was talk that your father, the king, has been trying to capture a Dragon. Impressive as that might be, it seems a dangerous game!"

That elicited an enigmatic look from Niall. "We take our games rather seriously. Sooner or later, Seth always has its way."

"Dragons are not easily taken," he replied with an easy smile. "It is said they are intelligent and can even speak."

"Your culture reveres these creatures, do they not?"

"We revere *all* living creatures."

"That is not *our* custom. The beasts are inferior; we do with them as we will."

"A most curious custom to be sure!" King Torus broke in with a boisterous laugh. Kitel found the Alterrans harmless enough if vainglorious and orotund, though King Torus and Queen Nellis of House Alderman seemed somewhat different.

His expression soured, Lord Niall replied with an "*indeed*," and walked away.

"Watch out for that one," King Torus said conspiratorially once he'd left.

Perhaps not *everyone* at this convention was rapacious and scheming. Kitel Khan tested the hypothesis, telling the elderly king and queen of his concern over potentially displaced Humans now that war had broken out—a harmless enough topic of conversation at the time and one that was often met with feigned concern—but King Torus and Queen Nellis expressed a sincere proposal for providing further aid and had already gifted a large territory as a refuge for those who might be rendered homeless by the war.

"Please excuse me if I overstep, as I do not mean to be overly inquisitive," Kitel started, "but I was made to understand that you share this *Alderaan* already. How do your neighbors, the Killiks, feel about having non-Killiks on their world?"

"That is a *fair* question, Kitel Khan," Torus replied thoughtfully, "particularly since a lot of aliens aren't overly fond of Humans these days. The Killiks are communal by nature, but I've conferred with those they'd appointed to speak on their behalf. According to them, 'Oroboro'—that's what they called Alderaan before my granddaughter renamed it, 'planets are not possessions but living organisms that merit deep respect.' Can't say I disagree with them, though it's not something I generally share with *this* crowd. Perhaps you think me an old fool as well."

"I most assuredly do not," replied Kitel. "Our people feel similarly for Atrisia."

"I admire that, Kitel," Torus stated. "I really do. And I wish there were more like us rather than this pack of vultures we're forced to deal with!"

"Best that we table such conversation until we're in private," cautioned Queen Nellis. "That one," her eyes moved to Niall, "gives me the creeps. I do hope you'll come and visit with us on Alderaan. I'm afraid my husband is correct: we may have many allies, but not many *friends*, if you catch my meaning."

Assured that some good had come of his visit, Kitel Khan returned home. He would go on to take the royal couple up on their offer and met with them and their family numerous times in the years ahead. Kitel's eldest son, Prince Jar'Kai, would even go on to marry Princess Avishan, Torus' eldest granddaughter, producing noble heirs who went on to fight valorously for the Judicious.

THE VANISHED MOON OF ALDERAAN

The Sethans had departed Pax for the privacy of Seth long before. Their people were members of the secret society known as the Vault of the Sea, and the highest ranking amongst them formed the Vault of the Abyss. Gathered under the blood moon, hooded and wicked men of wealth and power, the Sethan Sages led a procession from their underground chapel to the center of the labyrinth, croaking obscene liturgies to chthonic gods along the way. For them, a most important time was at hand. Despite the setbacks they'd suffered, they'd been granted a boon above all other sedulous servants.

An epiphany like a Satyr with terrible black eyes had come before them with the precious seed of one that had been chosen. From the seed would burst forth from the deep wells and darkest crypts one of the Eldritch Powers so that it might be fully manifest in flesh, not merely as a shifting spirit, but as a god amongst men.

Lord Harod Niall had been the sole offspring of this wicked procreation (his mother having died cruelly in labor), but he'd been unable to serve as the conduit. His father, King Niall, had waited until the boy's thirteenth birthday. Shamed and enraged when the anticipated entity failed to manifest in his son, he took a rapier to run him through. The Sethan Sages would have none of that and cast a spell of withering on him. The moment his screaming flesh and innards mummified, they put the former king in the Hall of Kings and proclaimed Harod Niall King of the Seth.

And then they made it clear that what *he* could not do, his *seed* would.

For this reason had he traveled from the gate at Somerton country to the spectacular spires and domes of Leimart Castle, not long ago constructed on the Human settlement of Oroboro, to court the Alterran Princess, Lorna, with the promise of one day making her a queen.

Princess Lorna was the youngest of her father's five daughters. The blithesome and bull-like King Lampadias had been the sole heir of King Torus and Queen Nellis, and had recently taken the mantle of king after their deaths. The four planets in the system had been after Lampadias' four daughters, leaving their world's moon for Lorna, the fifth, who was "the moon of my eye," as he often told her. His father had first called their world Aldebaran for its resemblance to the star of legend, but after his Killik allies referred to him as "the Alterran Alderman of Aldebaran," a very young Lorna simply called it *Alderaan*, and that's the name that stuck.

As to Lorna's sisters, the eldest was married, leaving the next three with several suitors, though they were far from settled on any of the royal bores. With acceptable choices far and few between, Lorna had grown anxious and impatient to find someone with whom to escape the beautiful but otherwise dull world her great grandfather, King Par, had chosen to settle. Unless one enjoyed the company of family, servants, or the bewildering Killiks and their endless life-lessons, there was not much here for her. So she pleaded with her father to accept Lord Niall's proposal. She didn't know him well, but he was handsome enough, relatively youthful, and *Human*.

King Lampadias didn't wish his daughter to be unhappy, but he held reservations about losing her, and it was at times like these that he missed his parents the most. His

wife, Queen Na'ir, came from House Grizmallt. She approved of the match, citing Niall as a fellow royal of significant wealth, antiquity, and high standing. Although that was as far as their knowledge went, the need to secure appropriate marriages for her daughters in a highly competitive market was paramount in her mind. Moreover, as she herself had been given in marriage to Lampadias young, she understood her daughter's need to start her own life. Had the king or queen shared the news of Lord Niall's proposal with their Atrisian in-laws, things might have turned out differently than they did, but as it hadn't occurred to them to do so, they gave their blessing.

Only Delaya, Lorna's elder by two years, remained nonplussed. "I don't understand you, sister! You are young and beautiful and only *seventeen*. With time, you can secure any young man of your choosing. Why gamble your life on a stranger?"

"Lord Niall *is* of my choosing," she replied haughtily.

"You know *nothing* about him! Don't you want to marry someone you're in love with?"

"*Love* is a myth for little girls who still believe in fairy tales. Do you know what is real? Getting away from this barren world for a life of excitement and intrigue!"

"You sound just like mother," Delaya replied. "Alderaan is *not* barren. It's filled with beauty and wonder. You just don't see it anymore. Besides, we're not prisoners here. Just outside that gate are boundless worlds to explore! You used to enjoy that."

"Yes, more *alien worlds of wonder*," Lorna retorted, exasperated. "That's *your* interest, sister. You were always the explorer and adventurer in our games and travels. I want to be a queen."

"Now who believes in fairy tales?" When Lorna only made a sour face, Delaya continued. "Besides that, I don't have a good feeling about this King Niall. There's something in his eyes that feels… empty or… false… He gives me chills."

"Don't you see? That's where we differ. When I look into his eyes, I can feel a *grand destiny* awaiting me! I know that together, we're going to change the galaxy!"

The wedding took place on Alderaan, after which Lady Lorna and what few possessions she valued were moved to the Hyades Estate of Somerton country on Seth.

In the first few months, everything was exciting, even if Seth was rather similar to Alderaan, only without the familiarity of her sisters, servants, and parents. She even missed the Killiks. But in another few months, the blush of wedded bliss had faded, and Lorna was again feeling bored and lonely. Her husband was often off on various duties for the state, which he said would only weary her, and her new servants were reticent and dour. Moreover, she began to suspect they were keeping things from her.

Harod's relatives were worse. Where his younger brother was guarded and evasive in a manner that made him seem more than merely diffident, his sister and grandmother looked and spoke to her in ways that were outright ominous, and Lorna began to feel what Delaya had once said about something chilling behind the eyes. Thankfully, their visits were far and few between. As to the village, they were made up of attendants, distant relations, and employees, but unlike her father's happy-go-lucky subjects, these were withdrawn and discreetly unfriendly, and she assumed they were jealous of their new queen. She would find no friends amongst these Sethans.

So she spent time on their vast grounds and even attempted the hedge-maze that sat at the center of their estate. For some reason, it didn't suit her constitution. Each time, after a few minutes exploring it, she'd begin to perspire and feel dizzy, invariably causing her to have to leave. And on one morning, having determined to conquer it, she took anti-nausea herbs and charged in. She woke up in bed, having apparently fainted and needing to be rescued, as her rather cross lady's maid informed her.

There was at least one other alien civilization on this world, the Solleu. A vaguely reptilian species, they scrupulously avoided the Sethans. Lord Niall said they were irrational and refused to become their subjects, for which reason he'd come to resent them over the years. This was at least *something* of interest, and with nothing better to do, and thinking she might serve as a good diplomat and bridge between their peoples, she sought out the Scullen river based on a map she found of the local area.

She could smell the wetness before she saw it. The gentle waters sang through the trees, telling tales of freedom and mirth, but these were old tales from before, and the sudden cold reminded her that time was not in her favor. Fording at a shallow crossing, she alighted on the Solleu side and went in search of this saturnine people.

It wasn't far to their village, and though surprised to see a stranger, they treated her with hospitality and a kindness she hadn't known she missed. The Solleu lived in quaint, teardrop-shaped huts made of a material that resembled fire wasps nests. The huts were waterproof and could withstand the strength of a hurricane. Within each were several rooms that were built above a hollow layer in which was housed plumbing and running water that drew from the nearby well.

She was quite taken with the ways of the Mountain Tribe, so-called for the icy blue peaks visible on the north and west. Yet despite her best efforts, she couldn't get them to agree to visit her for any reason whatsoever. They too seemed to be holding onto a secret, only with them the motive seemed rooted in sadness and fear. The most Lorna could get out of them was a warning from their shamaness: "This world has been tainted by a great evil. You should return to your own while there is yet time… before the seed is planted… before the shadow spreads… *before the Seth line grows!*"

When her husband returned home later that evening, she told him all she'd done that day but opted to leave her visit out of her account. She wasn't sure why she felt the need to, perceiving only that she'd be putting the gentle Solleu in some kind of danger. But it struck her afterwards as a rather fanciful thing to imagine.

In the next pleasant but scant few days, Harod had departed again, though this time not without an argument in which she made it clear that one of the reasons she'd agreed to marry him was so that she *wouldn't* be stuck in a castle all day without friends or things to do. He recommended throwing a banquet and inviting her family. A party wasn't what she meant. She wanted to be part of his life and do something meaningful. He insisted that she was, and would, but then, almost offhandedly, he added, "There are things you wouldn't understand or *want* to."

After he left, she made it her business to discover the nature of the things she "wouldn't understand." Without holonet access, it would begin with a thorough search of the chancery and library—the servants be damned! This was *her* house now.

Apart from the usual administrative documents, what she discovered from the genealogy books, registers, and private journals in her husband's office was perplexing, an odd admixture of religious beliefs and ancient history. The Sethan line was old. Baron Jamie Niall had played an influential role in the rise of Chancellor Zhell on Urthha. Seth was itself a coded name with baleful associations, and the Sethites were recorded as "the children of wroth under Sithlan's black wings." The Niall name came from a prestigious Human dynasty from "the old world"—shipbuilders, masons, landowners, and global financiers. And as was true of many in clandestine fraternities, by day they walked the halls of power, honored as public servants, while in the depths of night, they were practicing thelemic malisons as the Vault of Sea.

Likely, this was just men's club affairs exaggerated for theatrical purposes; her father said several of the Core elites engaged in such tomfoolery. According to the records, Harod descended from a long legacy of adepts, thirty-third from Howard MacNeill, the infamous "Magus of the Marcato" and Master Liberty Builder. Armed with a name, she dug deeper and found a ledge noting that this MacNeill had offered his firstborn son to an entity that would later manifest through his second child and daughter.

Chilled, Lorna looked about the chancery. At the onset of twilight, the everlengthening shadows spread in the far corners that now seemed full of watching eyes. She put the books away and departed for the dining room. If she missed her evening meal, it would look suspicious, and she wanted to find out more.

As she dined on the various courses and sipped on the harvest of the twenty-four-year vintage from nearby Dorset, she began to think herself silly and provincial. What she'd read were clearly metaphors and poetic expressions of some unusual polytheistic belief system. No wonder he'd said that she wouldn't understand. Well, that was that. Tomorrow, she would make a search of the library and see what these religious beliefs were really about before judging them.

That night was spent in fitful dreams in which she was being chased by something she couldn't see in a twisty old manse revealed to be a mausoleum. The voice of the Solleu shamaness repeated her stern warning to escape while she yet could.

When she awoke early the next morning, her husband was by her side. She hadn't remembered going to their bedchamber or when he'd arrived back home. In fact, she didn't recall much of anything after dinner. He laughed at her inability to hold her wine and rose to dress for an early meeting. She didn't argue to go with him this time, claiming that she might sleep in a bit longer.

"I'm glad to hear it," he stated. "You'll have to take it easy now."

"What does *that* mean?" she laughed.

He looked askance at her. "I told you last night that the doctor's report came in. You must have really had a few glasses. Our eight-week-old baby is perfectly healthy." He ruffled her hair and kissed her on the forehead before leaving the room, reminding her that she'd best take it easy on the spirits. Lorna reeled.

Two months pregnant! How had this happened? And yet he spoke of it as if I'd known it all along. Something is very wrong! She dressed and departed for the library. It was time to research this Vault of the Sea.

Of the rare books available to the Sethan Lord, whose library was considerable, were those that contained spellcraft, and Lorna skimmed over pages containing instructions for the blood-rites of *itsu-ashmûd*, which under even the best of circumstances—with willing participants—more often than not ended with the spellcaster destroyed. But the enchantment that was bookmarked was that of the even deadlier ritual of subjugation, *kripkâth*, also known as the *bornless ritual*. There were several methods of affecting this spell; the one that held the most danger involved direct manipulation of something called *midi-chlorians* in order to bring forth a suitably empty vessel to house a god. To affect this required damaging and distorting the organelles so that they blindly obeyed the Magus instead of the Whills.

There had to be an explanation for all this, and she continued searching a few more hours until she came upon a small handwritten book, hidden behind a larger tome. She might have passed it by, but she recognized the symbol on it from one of the volumes she'd skimmed regarding the icon of the Vault of the Abyss—that of a crimson eye coiled in flames, atop of which two heads of a single snake faced the other.

It is not to Zhothaqquah or the King of the Wind Demons that the child is promised, for those have already come, and Lloiger and Zhar are in the winds. As Magister of the Order of Abzu, the Niall Dynasty remains devoted to the Twin Serpents who are the Fanged Gods: Yamm'ka, who is Darkness and Lord of the Abyss and is known in other parts as Thamogorgos, and his consort, Lothan, who is the Lady of Chaos and Mother of Abominations. Today, they are all but forgotten and recalled only in our midst... The time of the conjunction is at hand. The Seven Doors will be flung open. Under the festive light of the eight-pointed stars that line the interior of the Dark Grove, fashioned and hidden at the center of the labyrinth, within the consecrated Hyades estate in the country of Somerton, *he will be birthed in blood.*

Terror gripped Lorna's heart, and as she read on, she realized that this was no mere poetry but instructions for a very literal ceremony of such grave transgression that she could not bear to consider its import. She knew only that she and her unborn child were in danger. Now, at last, she comprehended the sinister looks and veiled statements. Now she knew what it was she wouldn't want to understand.

She heard a sound and looked about the room, seeking out prying eyes in the dark. Composing herself as best she could, for she now realized that every member of this household was an enemy, she vacated the library for her own chambers, planning along the way. If she prepared even a small satchel, they would know and likely try to stop her. But neither could she just march out the front doors. Evening had fallen, and such odd behavior would no doubt call attention to herself in the worst possible way. No, she would have to be brave and wait the night. In the morning, she would take only what she could inconspicuously carry and depart through the gate back to Alderaan. *What a fool I've been*, she thought grimly as she turned the corner—

"How are you feeling this evening?" Lord Niall said, startling her from behind. "Jumpy, I see. Is everything all right?"

"I'm still not quite over my headache," she replied quickly, reminding herself to smile. "I think I'll avoid all wine for the time being."

"At least until the baby comes," he added with a widening grin, resting his hands on her stomach.

"Yes… You know, I was thinking. Maybe we *should* have a celebration of some kind. I would love to see my family again." In truth, the idea had just popped into her head, needing something to say that wouldn't give her away.

"Perhaps a small gathering only, rather than a large affair. It's important you don't overtax yourself."

"Of course," she said emphatically, having no intention of remaining on Seth for longer than another day. "I'll write the invitations in the morning." She turned to go.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Harod asked. "You don't seem yourself."

"You're right, of course," she turned around, consciously relaxing her body. "I suppose I'm just anxious about the baby." That much was true.

"He'll be just fine," Harod returned. "I'll be around most of the day if you need any assistance."

She had to force a smile when she heard it. "No business for a change!" she said, managing to keep her voice steady and the statement light. "That must be a relief."

"Nothing as prosaic as all that, unfortunately," he frowned. "We have to provide security at the gate. There have been some *threats*, political in nature, nothing for you to worry about really."

"Oh, well, that seems… rather extreme." It was all she could manage; inside, she was crestfallen. The gate was the only way on or off the planet.

"It's nothing. Many worlds are now keeping armed security at their gates. Wouldn't want anyone coming to steal you away from me!"

"I should think not," she returned. "I best get to my chamber and freshen up for dinner." She turned to go, but he grabbed her firmly and planted a kiss on her lips. "You are *very* special to me, Lorna… I hope you know that. Our child will be even more special yet." Then just as quickly as he'd appeared, he departed.

Lorna took a breath. She felt trapped, caught like a flare-wing in a spider's web, only her husband was the spider.

Sleep was out of the question. It took all her strength not to bolt screaming out of the manor, but a mere trip to the fresher—signifying her husband still awake beside her—quashed that thought. By the next morning she rose, exhausted, but went about her day as normal. After breakfast, she began writing her invitations. She'd thought of writing a plea for her help, but her lady's maid was hovering about uncharacteristically like a maze-fly that smelt meat. Lorna didn't buy her act of merely wanting to be helpful. She was no doubt spying for her husband. The invitation to her parents would have to be kept innocuous. Even a coded cry for help would be intercepted and expose her to danger. Perhaps once her family came, she could tell them everything and leave with them!

"It's going to be a lovely soiree, don't you think, ma'am?"

"How do you mean?" Lorna furrowed her brow. Her lady's maid never made small talk, just irritated grumbles of "Yes, ma'am," and, "Not a good idea, ma'am," and "If you say so, ma'am," all of which sounded like stern disapproval.

"It's just that ye haven't yet met all of the king's family, have ye? Dribs and drabs, to be sure, but the clan is rather large, and no doubt their attendants will be coming too. What, with all the trouble in the galaxy, I'm certain they'll bring plenty of security. *Just in case*!"

"Ah, I see…" She took her point all too well. There would be no running off with her family. "I… uh… look forward to meeting them all."

"D'ye, now?" she said, smirking.

"Yes, well, I think I'll go and bring these to the post."

"I can do that for ye if you'd like, save ye the trouble."

"Thank you, but I can use the exercise."

"Not *too* much!" she said in declamatory tone. "Ye can't be stressing the baby."

"The baby is still seven months away. I think a short stroll will be fine."

"It's closer than ye think!" She glared smugly as if daring her to contradict her.

Lorna departed the house, careful to ensure that no one was following her. Mail was sent by Deliverers through the gate to the various worlds of their destination. Similarly, in this small colony, mail that came in through the gate was put in a post-house and then taken by local Deliverers to the various addresses. The Deliverer on Seth had a tiny post house with an open window. She never actually saw the Deliverer in person, but as she'd frequently received and sent letters to her parents and sisters, she had no doubt the letters would be sent in due time.

Now was her chance to open the envelopes and write what she really wanted to, but just then, the Deliverer appeared before her. The man was a gnarled thing, crooked with age and vice and the smell of too much tabac about him. It didn't help that he wore an expression like that of an irate lraida.

"I'll take those for you, your Ladyship," the crooked man said. She supposed it was meant to sound polite, but it came out threatening instead.

After she gave him the stack of invitations, she turned and walked away at a rapid clip. Scanning about but not seeing anyone in the vicinity, she turned west, heading for the river Scullen. There had been a bridge there once, but the Solleu had removed it when the Sethans came. She remembered the path where the water was shallow enough to cross and took off her shoes, still looking behind her and listening for anything untoward. She took a breath she didn't know she was holding when she reached the village.

Out of the central hut came the shamaness. "I'm sorry to see you're still here…"

"I didn't understand before," Lorna tried to say before collapsing in her arms, releasing in tears some of the terror and frustration she'd felt in the last two days. "I need your help!"

"You do not know what it is you ask… I see that you are with child… and now guarded is the gate. I should have better explained matters to you months ago, but I feared you'd think me mad and tell *him*."

"*Months?* I only spoke with you a week or so ago! Look, if it's an imposition, I'll just keep going… I don't know, somewhere, anywhere. What's that way?" Lorna pointed to the far west, opposite the direction from the castle. "I won't go back, and there has to be someone or some place where I can hide until my parents arrive."

"You will find only death that way. Many of the Solleu tribes turned hostile after the Sethans came, for they did not hide their wicked ways then as they do now, and killed many of the Solleu were slaughtered… But the Mountain tribe has already spoken! You may shelter with us, but I do not know how much help we will be when they come looking for you. And come they will. We know of a secret place, but they wield the black arts, and they will *not* stop seeking, for what you carry is more precious to them than all the wealth they have acquired in all their cruel years."

"Why is this child so important?"

But the shamaness only looked at her sadly. "You *know* why."

For two weeks, Lorna knew a small measure of peace. They had taken her to a small camp up in the north that they believed the Sethans were unaware of. Lorna's first week was spent in terror, jumping at every shadow; by the second, she began contributing to the community's chores; on the third, she began to feel more at ease and confident that things would work out. That was when they came, men in hoods.

Just as they'd practiced, she was smuggled down a well and hidden behind a copse of trees outside the village. But the hooded men returned a day later, and this time they found her and carried her away. She wept when she saw the huts of those who'd given her refuge burned to the ground. Those who'd been caught outside when the Sethans had come were put to the sword and left in the open to rot. She looked for the shamaness, as if to apologize for having brought this awful thing upon them, but she could not find her, and she hoped against hope that she and the others had made it out.

Lorna was returned to the castle and forcibly bathed by her smirking lady's maid and another who held her down, but was left otherwise unharmed. Guards were posted outside her chambers and the keep's doors, and she was prohibited access to a datapad or writing utensils. Lord Niall, whose eyes had now gone frigid, made it clear to her that when her family arrived, should she try to escape or warn them in any way, he would see to it that every one of them was butchered as she looked on.

The day of the party came. Lorna struggled to feign happiness, for this was another condition imposed on her, but her heart was broken at seeing her mother, father, and sisters gaily attired and joyous at their reunion and the coming baby. Delaya alone suspected something was wrong, but the most Lorna could do was furtively slip in her pocket a keepsake, a mere coin, with a look that said to keep quiet about it.

With the festivities ended, her family returned home, and Lorna fell into a deep depression. She tried to think of various means of escape, but the thought of the Solleu kept coming to mind. She assumed she'd have longer, but she was soon showing. Two months of unending days and stultifying nights passed, her only mercy being that Harod left her alone, though her lady's maid and other staff watched her like hawks to ensure she did no harm to herself or the child.

Then came the labor pains.

In an odd way she felt glad that her ordeal was coming to its end. It was twilight when she was taken once more by hooded figures, this time through the hedge maze to the Dark Grove where her husband and a hooded cabal awaited, reciting some hideous chant. He was himself decked out in some ridiculous crimson costume.

It suddenly struck her how absurd and sick it all was, and she laughed. "You are all damned fools!" And she laughed again, suddenly tickled by their lunacy. One of the hooded figures stood up to strike her, calling her some name, but Lord Niall stopped her hand. Lorna recognized the voice as that of her lady's maid. So she laughed again. "One day, you're all going to pay for what you did to me!" Then she remained silent and proud as the fools resumed their foolish chanting.

Lady Lorna died in labor as the cruel life within her emerged. She'd earlier named the boy Jamie, but his father rejected that. Calling him *StarCrow*, Lord Niall held the baby up and invoked the ritual of the Twin Serpents.

The next day, Lord Niall buried the queen beside the Scullen river. Then he sent a missive to the King and Queen on Alderaan at Leimart Castle, telling them of the tragic passing of their daughter in childbirth. Alderaan's grief was great and compounded by the king's self-reproach and enervation. Even the Killiks mourned.

Later that night, bowing before his empty, double-headed phoenix throne, the Magister of the Order of Abzu pleaded with the dark gods that he served that the whole ordeal had not been in vain.

STARCROW THE WICKED

Lord Niall's answer came six years later when the precocious child crawled up on his proud father's lap and said, "The seed of the Chosen was placed into your mother, from which it went to you and has now come to me. But I must have *all* of it if I am to emerge!" With that, the boy took out a blade and stabbed his father in the belly. To the shocked attendants, he commanded that Lord Niall be brought to the utility chamber where his open wound was attached to the Harvester, an apparatus that allowed StarCrow to slowly drain his father's life-essence until there was nothing left but a dried-up husk.

So did the young Prince of the Sethans—subjugated by the gliding Serpent of Chaos within him—become King. The Sethan Sages who'd witnessed his birth continued to instruct him unto adulthood, but in all things, he surpassed them. When he'd attained the age of thirteen, the Forbidden Texts were open to him, and in their original tongues did he read them.

StarCrow decimated the remaining native Solleu population in response to their coordinated attacks against the House of Seth, prompted years earlier by the massacre of the Mountain tribe. Those who were not subjected to the harrowing ritual of *orskfrûm* were physically and psychologically transformed by means of black science and the rigorous invultuations of *dulkraur* to become the Gorgon-like Eurnyans, from which emerged those known as Shambleau who were set loose to seek their prey in the dusty bordellos and ranchlands of far-flung worlds.

StarCrow spent long years in violence and spellcraft, but when it came time to procure a betrothed, his soothsayer, a sere and sententious man, recommended first the Sith. But StarCrow objected, for he had no taste for the red devils. So, with stridulent sortilege, the soothsayer said, "Look to the eyes of the Stygian Witches!"

The Stygian Witches were the hidden daughters of the Witch-Queens of Drômencas. There was not much that was hidden that StarCrow could not uncover, and he single-mindedly pursued them until, finally, he discovered their whereabouts on the world of Algar. Arriving with Sethan armies at his back, he came with his charm and rare treasures to woo the wicked Dyzan Queen, Blavatstar.

Blavatstar was herself a force to be reckoned with. Known as the Red Witch, it was she who had written the *Book of Dyzan* and corrupted a faction of the Kwa on Dathomir, bringing further shame to that race. She did not require a mate, already possessing several lovers more than adequate for her tastes. Her eldest daughter, Roselye, had come of one such union. But StarCrow had something they did not: untrammeled, primordial power. She would have to be on guard, for here was no mere man. And yet, he was still made of flesh and bone, and she knew how to tame those.

Years and wars passed and an iniquitous line was raised, but ever StarCrow kept his eyes on the Star Dragons. The time came when they were at war. StarCrow and Roselye had already divined the location of Xuaquarres, the Dragon's Heart, which would thereafter be known as The Dragon's Graveyard, for there they went and killed the Custodian of the Duinuogwuin along with all of the precious Star Dragon eggs, save for one that StarCrow took for himself. As the Human frame did not well suit Lothan, he readied to transfer his essence into this more potent form. The *bornless ritual* came with a cost not just to the Star Dragons, but to all of the Sethan wizards who worked the spell. Queen Blavatstar, who was present during the ritual, was also killed, but this was an act of matricide carried out by her daughter, Roselye, StarCrow's mistress, who sought to be queen in her stead and would brook no impediment to her ambitions.

DRAGON WARS

With many of their brood in tow, the Basiliskans streaked across red and riven skies to force by flame all who would not bow before the Goddess. The Dragon races were then the most powerful forces in the galaxy, capable of setting entire worlds ablaze. Their course had unintended consequences, however, forcing the Star Dragons to take notice. Thargorograht fumed at the center of the Great Black Nest! She would have been far more subtle, using them sparingly as a source of terror to bring the worlds in line rather than an imminent threat that roused the terrible Duinuogwuin.

Like a mighty clap of the gods, the thunder of the Star Dragons swept the skies with majestic, outspread wings as jaws of steel clashed against raging bites and raking claws! On that day, the clouds were filled with the blood and fire of battling brethren, and so numerous were the bodies that fell from the heights that it was said the Father of Lights himself wept.

When the remaining Basiliskans and their allies fled, the Duinuogwuin refused to pursue, content that they had shattered them as a unified force. The Duinuogwuin had not wanted this, for they yet honored the laws of the Celestials, but neither could they stand by as their own offspring went about destroying at will. In the end, they proved to be the superior force, having slain many of their offspring. But no victory did they celebrate on this grievous and rueful night, for as they were about to discover, their sorrows had only just begun.

These events solidified the Basiliskans and other Dragon races as a malevolent force that would ever scour the stars as predators, scavengers, and enemies of any whom they chose. And some were put to baleful use when summoned by StarCrow to the Outer Darkness where they were bred with each other and Lothan's own seminal material, bringing about the monstrous Sugati, the serpentine Werthrent, and the titanic Balyegs, which were aquatic and tellurian monsters called "Behemoths from the World Below." Included in this rank were the two-headed Eborsisks, Battle Hydras, and Gruthic Winged Beasts. But the Leviathans were the pinnacle of their aims. So named for the Lord of Chaos, some had five, six, or even seven heads.

The first of the seven-headed Leviathans was tasked to guard the Royal Seed. This was the pinnacle of the Xothians' experiments, as they now mixed genetic material from the Sarmaks with the Arous King. The progeny that came forth would take long centuries to grow until it manifested as a gigantic cyclopean, bulbous head under which thousands of tentacles tracked.

In this way did the avatar of the Darkness manifest in Skyriver, he that is known as Yamm'ka, god of the Yam'rii, Lord of the Abyss, Choronzon, the Slayer, and the entity later worshiped as Yun-Yammka by the Yuuzhan Vong.

This had long been Lothan's plan, for the Lord of the Abyss was her consort, and they were devoted to one another above all others. Together they would in secret seek to supplant the Lord of the Planes who they suspected of a perfidious agenda.

The Dragons were circumspectly sent forth to specific battlegrounds and worlds. A few even had the power to breach dimensions so as to birth dragons beyond Skyriver unto other realms, though the largest were kept hidden away in the dark undulating depths with Yamm'ka, attended to by blind, psychic servitors until the time came for them to soar into the heavens and swallow the stars.

Not all of the lethal Dragons had chosen a side. Many guarded their neutrality, going so far as to conceal their true name. Those known only as Space Dragons chose to nest safely from prying eyes within the Caiyan Abyss, a vast region of several black holes dividing Montressor, the Procyon Expanse (now known as the Juvex sector), and the Broken Territories of the Forsaken Range (now the Ninth Quadrant).

As for the Star Dragons, upon their return home, they found that while they'd been away, their guardian had been slain and the precious eggs of their Duinuogwuin Queen smashed, save for one that was stolen. It went hard with them, for they blamed themselves and fell into deep despair. Eventually, after a long period of mourning, and having already suffered the worst of it, they determined to finish what they'd started and avenge themselves on those who'd committed this terrible evil. Following this, the Star Dragons resolved to never again fall prey to their passions and the vicissitudes of a broken galaxy. Later, the Fāta invited them to a secret realm that opened onto Andowyne, Ravaath, and other Hidden and Sacred Worlds, where they might heal, produce more offspring, and serve as champions for the realms.

THE SHADOW COUNCIL

StarCrow's seduction of the Stygian Witches had been no mere act of pride. These were the daughters of the Ancient Ones and the pureblooded Sith Witch-Queens. Their offspring would serve as the catalyst for the next part of his plan to bring forth into willing and wizardly flesh the remaining Dark Ones.

As with his mother, Roselye could not survive the birth of her brood, who were the powerful Draconian Nephilim, a vermilion, bipedal, dragonlike race. StarCrow knew aforetime that this might happen and saw to the replication of multiple clones of his beloved, and from these came numerous Draconians.

But he required something other than these, and so he turned to the offspring he'd earlier produced with Blavatstar prior to her murder.

From the line of Blavatstar would come the giant, Melkorr, the Dark Titan of Bolgen; Xander Gora, who was chosen to become Daritha Jensaar, the Cold One; Tribune Krath, Master of the Notron Centurions, known for his bronze armor and arrow-tipped sword which slew a thousand in blood sports before becoming Kashi's king.[65]

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[65] *Melkorr* is ancient even by Sephi standards and is derived from the High Sephi *mallku*, which means "king." From what scant accounts have been pieced together, *Melkorr* is the namesake of a once imprisoned Ancient One. There is, additionally, a connection to Bogan by means of another title given him in the word *Bolgen*, which translates to "filled with rage."

But it would be from the descendents of Blavatstar's first son, Ormuz, that the six members of the Shadow Council would eventually emerge, for Ormuz appeared as a purebred Sith while maintaining the characteristic propensity for violence and sadism typical of his Draconian half-siblings. And as he knew the Sith would rebel against any Draconians attempting to rule them, Ormuz would pass as one of their own. And so he went before the Ssither to assert his rightful claim as son of the gods.

The Ssither immediately began training Ormuz in the Aeon of Gnosis, which held the secret doctrines of the Ancient Ones. Meanwhile, StarCrow departed to expand his Sethan Empire and subjugate the Cathar, for whispers had reached his ears of a Chosen One born amongst them. StarCrow's tenebrous tale is told elsewhere. His triumphal defeat at the hands of the Cathar would mark the end of the Sethan Empire and the rise of the Sith Empire in its place. As for Lothan, she found purchase in the body of a potent Leviathan.

Those who subscribed to the teachings of Ormuz became known as the Followers of Hor (though they referred to themselves as Ashurans) and settled in and around the mountainous regions of Mittan as metallurgists and smiths on the continent of Asyr, which lay across from the continent of Kutha and south of Tibira, which is yet inhabited by the debased Draconian race who watch and wait, having built their cities as impregnable fortresses, for they had been told that their star would rise when the Sith's declined.

As is the way of the Sith, Ormuz's ascendence was not won without bloodshed.

The jealous and weak Supreme Potentate murmured with the Kissai Priests who made several unsuccessful attempts to have Ormuz assassinated, an act that led to a war between the Ashurans and Massassi. The Ssither would not get involved nor allow Sith soldiers to engage, stating only that the sons of the gods would hold sway.

The war ended with Ormuz beheading the Supreme Potentate, a blow helped by several rebel Kissai. Ormuz took over his authority, becoming the earliest of the *Ari*, which meant "Sith Lord" in their tongue, and he replaced the traitorous priests with his loyalists who would support the new Order of Aion.

For a time, the Sith were united, though it would not last. Several Ashurans defected to join a colony of Sephi they'd befriended on a world called Azura.

In the decades ahead, the heirs of Ormuz would advance in their respective arenas, with six chosen by the Shadow Kings to become replacements for the lost Ninûshabzu, though they would be referred to instead as the Ninûsgidzida.[66]

These were made up of:

> Nemonides D'krith; called Daritha Nemo Dak on Mrlssi, he spearheaded the terrifying, semi-sapient techno-organic vessels of the Sith built from the dead;

[66] *Ninûsgidzida*: literally, "Serpent Lords of the Great Tree." It is uncertain what the "Great Tree" references. It appears likely to have significance to their masters from some distant time in the past.

Eloy J'deo, the Maelstrom of Alpheridies; called Sanct Vitus, he was the first to fashion Dark Side treasures and ghastly puppets made from the skin and bones of his Alpheridian slaves;

Din Grrut, known as Czar Grrut, the Tyrant of Millinar, who ruled the Millinarian hermaphrodites and hoarded the healing fruits; he invented the blood sport and torture games and taught the infernal beasts to serve the Sith;

Dakara Ramises, the Black Pharoah of Doan; he who ramped up the expansion of Sith pyramids and ziggurats across worlds, for he knew the contaminating effects that such had and its implications of cosmic geography;

Lord Zelashiel of Malachor; called Zelashiel the Blasphemer and Apollyon, he summoned the Urey'la, who resurrected the old black speech of ur-Kittât, the distorted and inverted language of the Celestials, which became the Old Tongue of the Sith and Rozzum;

Nyarhepdreh, the Crimson King of Krayiss II and Oricon, the Keeper of the Secrets; he furthered great advances in black science when he was murdered by his son and forced to live as a dark spirit in another realm for aeons;

Sokratu the Elder; regarded as a great scientist and the Philosopher-King of Rimk, he taught the Sith much of longevity, death, and the spirit world.

Through the Infernal Portal on Drômencas the Ninûsgidzida were paid a visit one day by Moragarom, one of the Elder Daughters of Thargorograht whom the Sith refer to as the Unseen Queen or *Jen'ari* in their tongue. Appearing in a form more pleasing to the aesthetics of the Eruthros, she'd come to procure the wisest and stoutest of their sorcerers for one of her mother's projects and some warriors for her own cadre, for as with all of the Daughters of Thargorograht, she was ambitious.

The Ssither were well aware of the Great Black Web and its terrible Mistress, and while they bowed in deference to the Night Queen's emissary, they also did not vacillate in cautioning her that her objectives were in opposition to the plans of their masters. But as they were not *her* masters, she paid little heed to their warnings and commanded the Ninûsgidzida to come with her, weaving incantations to augment their strength so that they would survive the perilous journey to the Nest.

But the moment the transformations were complete, Moragarom was hit by a blinding vision in which she saw herself as a weak and shriveled humanoid trapped on a world of primitives and defied by pathetic tribes barely above sentience until terrible walking mounds closed in on her until she was overtaken: "So will you pay the price for your defiance!" said the tallest of the mounds.

Snapping out of the psychic omen, Moragarom immediately withdrew back to the gate, leaving behind the Ninûsgidzida. To the Ssither she said, "Your masters are

coming… they who have broken free of the unlighted chambers… But one day it is *our* kind who shall prevail and you who will scurry into your dank holes."

Not long after Moragarom retreated through the portal the Ssither had the Ninûsgidzida prepare the Infernal Gate with sacrifices of slaves and invocations, generating the right confluence between the physical realm and the forbidden realm wherein the darkest spirits might pass. It was well into the small hours of the night that *they* arrived, binding the six Ninûsgidzida by means of coalescing spirit and blood, giving each the power to change shape. In the black speech of the Old Tongue, they imprinted upon them: "You are the Ninûsgidzida, first of the Shadow Council, the Archimages of Drômencas! A great honor is here bestowed upon you! Go forth now as our agents, seize positions of authority amongst the Humans and others; maintain the face of respectability, and accomplish what the Serpent People could not, a philosophy of the Dark that will never be overthrown!"

Codified in the starry wisdom of the Ancient Ones, the Ninûsgidzida went forth to motivate the dedicated followers of the Left-Hand Path: the Vault of the Sea on Seth and Pax, from which came the Kashi Mer and Jentarajahs of Jentawui; the Black Lodge on Terra I, from which the Croke had emerged; the Aeon of Gnosis on Sol, from which arose the vampiric Rakshi; the Warlocks of Iqqua on Eibon, who were later absorbed; and the Vrkolak of Voorlach, who are the demons who went to the world of Knell, known later as Darkknell, whose inhabitants are the Knell of Muspilli.

That these groups did not openly war with one another was due to the Shadow Council who maintained communication with them *and* kept watch over them by means of the Oracle Stones that they'd appropriated and theurgically altered.

The Lords of the Shadow Council strove for long years to get them to rise above the base concepts of bloodline and wealth. But the icy sense of superiority that many of the dynasties and houses deemed so important meant that they did not all meet the challenge. Over time they splintered, reorganized, merged, expanded, or were destroyed. And out of all of them, it was the Order of the Sith that thrived, moving from a mere race to an ideology and, at last, to the status of Chosen Race.

ENTER ATRISIA

Lady Lorna had not died in vain. She'd passed along a clue to Delaya the day of the party. Though a mere token, an old coin with the symbol of two serpents facing one another above a red eye wreathed in flames, Delaya had held onto it, wondering at the peculiar emblem and the reason it had been secreted to her.

It wouldn't be until many years later that Delaya spotted the image on one of the banners of the Sethans who'd come to Pax to petition the government for funding. Delaya now ruled Alderaan after a controversial morganatic marriage to Darius Panteer, a lowborn with whom she fell in love. That the image was a Sethan one didn't immediately give her pause. Symbols were ubiquitous and old and often changed hands. But this was a rare one that elicited a memory of her sister. On arriving home, she went in search of the ancient coin. Her servants and children

helped her as madly she tore apart the ancestral castle searching for it. And there, in an old crate in one of the storage rooms few rarely went into, she found it.

Delaya suddenly felt stricken. Her sister's death in childbirth had been taken for granted at the word of her husband, but Seth had later closed its borders. Alderaan had had its own share of sorrows and celebrations with marriages and childbirths, but despite all this, the Queen Regent had not stopped pressing to see her grandchild.

When it was discovered that Lord Niall was himself dead, a surprise arrived at their gate shortly thereafter, dropped off by a senescent servant: a small, ruddy-haired boy of about six. The family was relieved and overjoyed, and Delaya adopted the child, who said his name was Jamie. The boy was sweet enough, though often silent, and she couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss. For one thing, he held no recollection of his father from any of the holos she showed him. Lorna had, of course, died when he was born, but Jamie would've been six when his father died. Irrespective of her misgivings, she loved the child, but always she wondered…

More than a decade had passed when rumors of the Sethans came to her ears, strange whispers of indefinably immoral acts and misbegotten deeds that they'd committed. All she could discover was that they were at war with some people or another. But this was the Empyrean Wars. *Everyone* was at war with someone, and no one world was wholly innocent. That was the evil of war, after all, to taint decent people by large degrees and justify it as necessary.

But Lorna had given her this coin for a reason. She had been trying to tell her something. That she'd been unhappy was clear enough. Others might not have seen the tells, but she did. So had their mother. What if she was saying that the family she'd married into was not what they appeared to be? What if something ominous had been at work?

It was too late to save Lorna, but that didn't mean it was too late to find out.

Delaya sent a telegraph to Avishan, who now reigned as Queen of Atrisia alongside her husband, Emperor Jar'kai, indicating that she wished to visit with them on a matter of some importance.

The Atrisians were a highly skilled and disciplined nation of warriors and sages who originally hailed from Ravaath. Their history books spoke of them once having battled an ancient evil that descended on that world. Although it had been defeated by a benevolent spirit and her allies, some took it as an ill omen and opted to leave for Atrisia, Tao, and other unspoilt lands. Several warriors went along to aid them, as did the gifted, and a few less-honorable ones who saw an opportunity for advancement.

So it was that when Queen Delaya retold the story to Emperor Jar'kai and showed him the coin, he confirmed her worst fears: "My father had met your grandfather on Pax long ago when he was but a young man. I remember because he had impressed upon me this saying: 'Of all the prevaricators on Pax, beware most the Sethans, who are serpents in the skin of men.'" Delaya's face dropped, but he went on to clarify the rumors she'd heard. "Warmongers to the last are the Sethans. Under a monster called StarCrow, they laid waste to entire civilizations! The emblem on this coin is ancient. It is the mark of the Vault of the Abyss, a devilish cult of whom the less said the

better. That your sister handed this to you in confidence was likely an indication that she had discovered their dark secret."

Delaya and Avishan openly wept at the implication, but they girded themselves as best they could and agreed to spare their mother for fear that she too would fall to enervation as their father had done. Seeing their sorrow, Emperor Jar'Kai made them a promise. "We of the Atrisians shall avenge your murdered sister, she who is as *our* sister!" Then he too gave way to tears.

Led by the k'Jtari, the greatest martial artists of their realm, the Atrisians' forces were soon mobilized and went forth to avenge Queen Lorna. And there was another faction that Emperor Jar'Kai conferred with, one who he believed would wish to join them in their endeavor. But not wishing to get their hopes up, he did not speak of it.

The Sethan Empire were yet in a weakened state following the defeat of StarCrow at the hands of Solomon the Cathar, though now that they were tied in bonds of blood to the Sith, with a number employed on Drômencas as breeders to produce Human-looking progeny, they were building back. On Seth, preparations were being made to overthrow the Earthworld in the Sol system. But for all their vaunted sooth-sayers, haruspices, and astromancers, they were utterly unprepared for a full-scale attack by the Atrisians with an army of Star Dragons at their back!

The retribution of the Duinuogwuin was swift and merciless. They slaughtered all but a few of the depraved Sethan Wizards who were abroad and many of their blood-hungry Eurnyan pawns. Their rout saw the Vault of the Sea reduced to the Kashi Mer of Pax, the Jentarajahs of Jentawui, leaving only a few remaining cosmic magicians and acolytes abroad. They would go on to cause trouble in their own rights, but never again would the Empire of Seth exist.[67]

The Duinuogwuin Queen who replaced their matriarch put the whole of the wicked Hyades Estate and its surrounding city to the torch, eradicating much of their history. Little remains of their spiritual taint, save for the Dark Grove and the Sethan lore preserved in the *Legend of the Seven Doors*.

The Sith would learn of Alderaan's role in this affair and seek vengeance so that by the next generation, the adult children of Queen Delaya would be forced to join their people in exile, for although they were willing to fight the accursed Sith, they opted instead to flee their world so as not to bring war upon the Killiks.

And so the Alderaanians settled on Aquilae and Ophuchi (later Ophideraan), but ever the Royal House remembered where they came from, and it was prophesied that one day they would return.

[67] The surviving Eurnyans attempted to form their own empire, though their attempts to gain a foothold in the Core were thwarted by the inhabitants of Perma.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

SORCERERS IN BLACK

THE GUNNINGAN GUARDS

Amongst the more rapacious subjects of the Old Ones were the Rakata. Bred from Ongree abducted from Skustell and Gungan fighters captured on Lehon, the sapiophagous Rakata were skillful and reared to be rigidly hierarchical.[68] Unlike their Bivall cousins, who maintained strict neutrality on Protobranch, the Rakata took over Lehon from the Gungans, who were then known as Gunningans, for Gunninga was at this time not a realm of evil but the furthest point from the Galactic Core—the physical and metaphysical "end of the galaxy," beyond which lay nothing. Long before the incursion of dark forces into Skyriver and before the *ex nihilo* creation of Illathurion, Gunninga was deemed by the Celestials the place where the Enemy might gain purchase, and so a watch was ever kept over it.

When the Old Ones decreed the eradication of the Gunningans, the Rakata arrived with thirsty swords and a grave wind that stank of death. They had not expected an easy skirmish, but the coming of the Kumumgah Crusaders, who were the Gunningan's progenitors and the original inhabitants of Tunit, took them by surprise.[69]

Noble galactic champions, the Kumumgah had harried forces in systems across the stars, bolstered allied armies, and helped regain bitterly lost ground. As with the Sephi, Sullustans, Jerni, and Muur, the Kumumgah also took in Human and near-Human refugees or found safe worlds for them. It was in this way that they'd first befriended the Atrisians.

So it was with proud hearts and sturdy blades that the Firstborn defenders, standing together as one with the Gunningan Guards, nearly brought the Rakatan force to its end. The Crusaders then reached out to their Atrisian allies to bring the Gunningans to a new home upon which they might dwell, for the old one was forfeit to evil things that had come with the Rakata for that purpose.

Having recently conquered the Sethans, the Atrisian warriors answered the call only to discover that the Rakata had merely feigned defeat. They were in great numbers even then, and as they'd been commanded to wipe out the Gunningans to

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[68] Ongree are a Gree offspring race. Rakata means "those who strike," though the root word has several curious meanings. *Rak* is a mammoth dragon, while *räkkä* refers to "crustaceans" and "blood-sucking insects." The vampiric Rakshi were known as the "cancer of mercury" and "demons" (from *rākṣasī*). Rakghouls are "Cancer Ghouls" and "ghouls who strike." Additionaly, *Ra-kata* could refer to the twilight, which may be where the Twilight Wars got their name.

[69] Though few besides their fellow Precursors and offspring races knew it, the Kumumgah were once known for their great sense of humor. They created the Umgah, a race of sapient blobs who shared their jocular nature and from which came the more well-known sentient Umgullian blobs.

the last child, they had surreptitiously followed their prey to their new world, cruelly watching and waiting before attacking.

The Atrisians, sensing that something wasn't quite right, stayed with the exiles to help them settle upon the former Sethan capital world, which they now renamed Naboo.[70] Further aid came from the Osserians, who were friends of the Gunningan peoples, and this arrived in the form of the Sando'jira through the subsurface gate in their ocean, so that when the Rakatans made their move on the Gunningans, the Sando Aqua Monsters burst out of the waters to smash and devour the unsuspecting invaders before descending again into the Naboo seas.

Baron Balmtop would not accept defeat. The Rakatan Praetor wore the skull of Grimwald, a Bovorian Duke he'd slain in battle. This marked his final trial before becoming leader.[71] For a Praetor or Consul to accept defeat or defiance meant a loss of face that would ensure their swift assassination and replacement. So they returned to Naboo with a legion of Nightspiders, Veermoks, Narglatch, Titavians, and others, including several underwater predators. They even sent agents to occupy the moon.

The Atrisians had well guarded their secrets, and in these days, they possessed a rare magic descended from Ravaath and developed at the feet of their most skilled adepts, which they used only in the direst need. The elder masters of the Atrisian k'Jtari were known as the Kiosutokyra, and they now stepped forth. Behind them stood their people awaiting their turn. After securing the sacred garments they would need, which they'd stored in their vessels for just such a purpose, they made supplication to protect this people as they performed this most dangerous of incantations. In moments, the Atrisians on Naboo and its moon grew to the height of Zaela trees!

Not one to be left behind, Chief Balam, the Gunningan ruler, demanded the Elders provide him a suitable weapon so that he might fight alongside them, for he would not allow them to defend his people without him. So they gave to him a spear topped by a rare mangana aqua jewel forged into a spearhead. With it, he would do much damage!

As giants, the Atrisians strode forth, crushing and smacking down the Rakata and their monsters and causing their terrified armies to flee before them.

But Baron Balmtop had brought his own secret weapon. Like the coming of death was the horrid visage of the Xothian, Mekamok, soaring forth on membranous wings, fouling the very air as his misshapen, tentacled head sought out prey wherever they might be found, turning the gigantic Atrisans one-by-one to stone!

The Rakata roared in victory, but Chief Balam, climbing upon one of the Atrisian Elder's now-stonelike shoulders, wrapped his tunic around his head to cover his eyes and flung his spear at Mekamok, who was just then gliding above. The screeching of

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[70] Naboo, from the Atrisian *N'Apu*, would *appear* to mean the "Wisdom of Ap" but the Atrisians did not pay heed to the Architects at this time. The Ravaath word *Apu* refers to the benevolent spirit of a land or person, while *Napo* means homeland.

[71] Grimwald was next in line to the throne following the death of the Bovorian Queen, Bovo Yaga, who was slaughtered along with her sisters by her own people after she demanded the death of their firstborn sons and daughters in payment for a recent loss in battle against the S'krrr. The Bovorians ever after refused to fly, have a single ruler, or participate in any war, save to preserve their neutrality. When Grimwald tried to return to the old ways, he was given to the Rakata.

the impaled Xothian caused all but the heads of the Atrisians to crumble as he crashed and split open like a smashed shuura.

Cursing at this turn of events, Baron Balmtop rushed over with his sword raised to strike off the head of Chief Balam, but the Gunningan Guards had followed their chief's lead. Picking up stones from the rubble of the fallen Elders, they hurled them with precision at the Rakatans in a fury never before seen amongst their kind, killing Balmtop and causing the vestige of the Rakata to flee back to their forsaken world.

That very night, Chief Balam led a funeral march comprised of Gunningans, Atrisians, and Osserians to Otoh-D'in, a garden hidden in the midst of the swamps that yet serves as a resting place for the dead. In the requiem that followed, the Osserian delegation comforted the mourners with the promised hope of an afterlife in the Land of the Dead, which the Gungans would later refer to as Ossorus.

In a similar way to how the Majan of Baroonda honored and deified their Sullustan saviors, as seen in the Nazwa Ruins, the Gungans later created a pantheon under Oma-Oma, the name given to their high matriarch who ruled them. In this way might they forever honor certain individuals who they deemed worthy of remembrance. The Atrisian Elders who'd sacrificed themselves were given designations based on their personalities in life: Dobbis (a warrior-princess who used to dance in the rain); Kobble (who had been a master chef); Nododo (who loved playing tricks on his friends and foes); Wamka Pol (who taught the Gunningans sports and games); and Gobba (the betrothed of Dobbis, who taught the Gunningans how to create magic from nature).

When Chief Balam died, his body was placed in Otoh-D'in, where he was said to have joined the Elders in the afterlife. The spear and jewel that had been gifted to him became one of the most precious artifacts that Boss Rugor Nass would see stolen (and later retrieved) during the Galactic Civil War. As for the wicked Mekamok and Balmtop, they were designated as gods of evil and destruction.

FORBIDDEN TOMES

But for the emergence of war, the Firstborn and their allies would have thwarted the ancient Enemy and their designs early on, but in the fog of battle, many evil things grew and thrived, feeding off the chaos, confusion, and calumny inherent to conflict. Secret sorceries, coded writings, magical artifacts, and accursed objets d'art were developed under the direction of the Shadow Council that would be brought to bear in the years ahead. So too the Infernal Portals; some served as lures to the Nine Hells or called forth malevolent entities from there. Apart from gates, they took the forms of dimensional forks, jade rings, amulets, fire opals, tapestries, spellbooks, puzzle boxes, the Glimmering Stone, and the Eidolon. To ensure they would not be destroyed by the hated servants of light, they and the secrets of their construction were hidden and passed on so that future generations might rediscover them.

The most infamous of the eldritch artifacts were the nine Forbidden Books of the Ethereal, which were grimoires thought to be partly sentient; these were comprised of *The Texts of the Third Order,* each written by one of the races of the Serpent Folk, which include the *Malatrium,* also known as *The Black Book*; *The Stone Book,* also known as *The Divine Septenary;* and *Nineteen Curses,* also known as *The Book of*

Unspeakable Words. The former appeared one day to the wicked sorceress, Bavmorda, while yet she was young, and she spent a lifetime and a king's ransom securing the other two. The other six incunabula included *The Golden King,* which is said to drive the uninitiated who read it to madness or death; *The Key of Rehobostar,* composed by an acolyte of Typhojem himself, requires the shedding of blood for each chapter to be unlocked; *The Book of the Dead,* contains the blasphemous history and lineage of the Outer Gods and instructions to raise the dead and build an Infernal Gate; the *Thothnych Manuscript,* also known as the *Elder Tablets,* composed in a death-trance by the daughters of the Dread Mother, is the unholy text of Yamm'ka and Lothan; *The Codex of Revealing* opens the door for the children of Aion to step through; like the *Stone Book* and *Elder Tablets, The Shadow Manuscript* (also known as *The Invocation of Spectral Light*) purports to be of Celestial origin but contains perilous spells, including *spiritus praesidium*, the malefic *itsu-ashmûd,* and *summonitum saticon*.[72]

Legends claim that, together, the nine books reveal the secret of the nine Gates of the Kingdom of Shadow, the nine Hellworlds, and the nine Dark Gods who will stand up from their thrones and stride forth with their dark legions on the Dark Crusade.

SECRET WARS

As commanded, the Sith waged war in secret in the early days, feigning ardent support in the Conclave of the Firstborn while using the intelligence gleaned there to strike at their brethren—a loyalty test that had been placed on them by their masters.

As *saviors*, the Eruthros came to the worlds of their offspring races to secure their loyalty. Such was the fate of the Draethos, Xexto, Givin, Bothans, and others.[73] But when the Givin leaders were caught planning to flee with their people, the Lords of the Shadow Council made an example of them by altering their appearance so that their visage would be terrifying. So too was their planet, Yag'Dhul, ruined by a complex tidal system of rapidly changing atmospheric and oceanic conditions. Some Givin pledged their allegiance to the Dark Powers and were given new worlds and forms. But most persevered. They had innate mathematical talents with which to turn their misfortunes to their advantage, efficiently repurposing their cities within hermetic seals, the success of which saved countless lives and gave rise to a mathematical-based theocracy and political body that continues to this day.

As *conquerers,* the Sith came to colonize and harvest slaves. Taking control of the gates so that none could come and go but them, they convinced the inhabitants to become part of their workforce to aid in the war effort. Those who would not be convinced would know pain. Alternating hard targets with soft, they employed terror

[72] These would inspire numerous grimoires and codices with varying names, some based on partial texts, such as the *Celaeno Fragments*, and some just as pernicious as the nine, like *The Testament of Carnamagos*, *De Vermis Mysteriis*, *Liber Ivonis*, *Pandemonium*, the *Song of Yste,* the *Book of Dyzan*, the *Book of Iod*, and the twelve-volume *Revelations of Glaaki.*

[73] Although historians and even Bothans have accepted the idea of Half-Bothans being genetically tied to them via some kind of Sith experiment, in fact the race that had come from Illathurion had no connection to Bothans and were known at one time as Satyrica, named after the Satyrs of old, that ancient race who now dwell amongst the specters, Dôls, and curs of Tindalos and Leng.

by means of wicked-looking ships, deadly warriors, arcane wizards, and bizarre monsters, and so harvested the worlds of Gand and Florn for easy resources. They attempted the same on Felucia, only to be repelled by the Firstborn who resided there. However, their betrayal was not exposed, as the Felucians retreated fully into isolationism in response to this shocking development.

This would not be the case when they came to Asmeru. Muscular of build, with straight and abundant coats that ran down their necks like a collarette in black, white, and grey, the Asmerukii were an elegant striped and spotted canid race with a proud carriage and keen eyes. Their world was abundant in palaces, for there was no division between rich and poor. Upon the tallest of their majestic, ice-capped mountains, the people would annually stride in procession to celebrate Q'anah ("the canon") in communion with their Celestial makers, after which they would hold a grand two-week long feast. In recent times, however, that custom was grudgingly cast aside in order to prepare for war.

Although Asmeru's interstellar gate was heavily guarded, the Sith got around that by sending a corrupted Cloud Demon to burrow a sulphurous hole through space in the area that would come to be known as the Asmeru Anomaly, allowing them a critical surprise attack. When the Asmerukii saw the Eruthros disembark, they were confused at first, for the idea of an Elder Race serving the Enemy was yet shocking, but as the Sith roared into battle, parangs held high, blowing their death whistles and unleashing their foul hybrids, the Silooth and the Giant Battle Hydras, the resolve of the Asmerukii hardened, and they fought like mad dogs, refusing to give in or become slaves.

Those in line for succession to the Kissai Priesthood had grappled for the right to be sent to this engagement. They could neither back down nor return to Drômencas without a victory. Fearful they would lose against this fearsome adversary, they directed the Filar-Nitzan to tunnel into the core of the world to provoke the Firedrakes within it, believing the threat of worldwide calamity would drive the natives to capitulate. But in this act, the Cloud Demon was driven berserk, burrowing through what is now the Zemyatin Anomaly as enraged Fire Elementals erupted in mountainous flames on the surface, and though this turned the Sith wizards to ash, it also brought devastation to the planet, which suffered from a sudden catastrophic collapse of the oceans' thermohaline circulation, a massive methane release, full land-ice melts, and rising sea levels. While the Asmerukii fought to restore stability, the still maddened Firedrakes would not so easily be calmed. Nor could the devastating effects be undone. The Asmerukii perished to the last canid with only their ruins left behind to remind the galaxy that they had once lived. The Elder Races mourned, as did the Canidans, Pherro, and other progeny of the Asmerukii.

Once the true nature of the Sith was known, they cast off the pretense of Eruthros and attacked in full force. Now did sorcerers in black go forth with black swords and black magic into the battlefields of the stars. At this time, their own sacred worlds near Drômencas were established on Rhelg, Kalsunor, Khar Shian, and Khar Delba, though the Judicious would regard them as desecrate worlds.

The Cathar were the next of the Firstborn to be targeted, but the fierce lions were prepared and drove them back in a startling victory. In retaliation, the Sith invaded Cathiss, the homeworld of the Catumen, first of the Cathar's offspring races.

A pastoral felinoid race, the Catumen thought they could fight as well as their parent race, but the Sith had taken no chances and arrived with a massive force. Rather than face extinction, they capitulated. By the time the Cathar discovered the attack on Cathiss, the Catuman elders were executed, with the remaining members of the race tightly packed into immense slave ships (dubbed *Catumaran* ships). Their world was renamed Athiss and dedicated to the Immortal Gods of the Sith. Although the Catuman would later break free when their feline sibling-races discovered their whereabouts and surged Ereesus, where they'd been imprisoned and guarded by the traitorous Zygerrians, never again would the Catumen race claim a homeworld.

The nexus of future Sith regimes would be founded on worlds wherein cultic lore and ensorcelled artifacts were secreted and guarded by the Servitors of the Night upon lands poisoned by accursed temples, haunted forests, unhallowed mountains, and demon-infested caverns. Such worlds included Xoth, New Xoth (later N'zoth), Krayiss II, Morganthus, Alpheridies, Medriaas (later known as Nathema), Muzara, Tomo-Reth, Nilrebmah II, Voss, Doan, Janguine, Onderon, Arorua, Tascollan, Djun, Hoth, Jaguada, Kruskan, Zabba II, Millinar, Serepentis, Despora, Malachor V (home of their Malagarrian allies), Quasti, and Jennehem.[74] And many of their subterranean cities were burrowed with the aid of Nytocris.

It was not all victories for the Sith, for the Arbrans had bested them, and the winged, lion-headed, serpent-bodied Eellayin proved too formidable to overcome or tempt. Though the Eellayin would not wipe out the Sith nor permit their Raquor'daan to do so, they sent them back to Drômencas in terror! With war upon their shores, the time had come to depart, for they were of the Resolute. They now spoke with the Raquor'daan. Many opted to join them. Others wished to go to Sriluur, the world of the Eellayin's Weequay progeny, in the hopes that they might protect them, for the Weequay had philosophically aligned with the Judicious.

So did the Eellayin mournfully alter their gorgeous Dark Wolves to have stingers. Of their other beloved creatures, many chose to depart with their makers, but not all, and the Eellayin were tasked to alter as well their Bha'lir, Tusk Cats, and Sabercats—both Binarian and Unicorn varietals—who would not leave their respective worlds. These defenses came in handy when the deathly howls of the Bandigos, who were the brood of the Windagon, departed Wyndigal with the Annoo-dat and Defel to attack Sriluur and other worlds in the Periphery region.

For the Weequay, opposing the Sith meant years of war and the deaths of their elders. While they would likely have recovered, they were exploited by corrupted rulers who, borrowing from the Jydan religion then spreading in the galaxy, invented an animistic pantheon collectively called the Sant, which was loosely based on the Architects and Old Ones and replete with repugnant practices, such as the idolatry of the black-stoned *thal* (*thal* meant "deception" in Sriluurian, though that derivation was ignored as it was twisted to mean "blessing" and "favor.") Much was lost as Weequay society was reduced to a spiritually and culturally primitive state, and into that arena would come the Hutts many years later.

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[74] Known to the Caravan of Cyrannis and others as the Red Planet, Jennehem served as the onetime prison of Count Ibaulis. Though guarded by Diathim Seraphs, they were unable to stop him from tearing open a wormhole capable of diverting prey to his Meclon servants and others on Orgus.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

BEYOND THE DOORS

THE NIGHTMARE MACHINE

The Precursor Q'rel were a proud and technologically-advanced race from Q'rul in the Atravis Sector. Known also as the Krell or Qhrell, they had been so named for the red coral-like scales that ran along the trunks of their bodies. Even before the Oratorio of Onrai, they believed they could eradicate the Darkness that had snuck into Skyriver. Although later warned by the Celestials that it was not the will of the Maker that the Earthworlds be removed, Kel'tarcPei, the Q'rel Ascendent, haughtily responded, "But it is the will of the Q'rel!" And the winged, radially-symmetric cephalapoids put all of their resources towards this end.

The first of the Four Steps in their eradication plan was *self-elevation*. "To defeat the enemy, one must know the enemy; to know the enemy, one must *become* as the enemy." As this process would have to occur in secret lest their forebears and sibling races attempt to thwart them, the Q'rel constructed a vast laboratory under the surface of the uninhabited world of Altair 4 in the Thrasybule sector.[75]

Early attempts at intelligence-enhancement produced mixed results, with some of the Q'rel growing astute enough to realize that their course was not the path to elevation but a reckless plunge into delirium. But folly had seized the rest, and the opinions of the sage were the minority. More successful was the creation of servants.

The second step—started in the midst of the first and continued long after the fourth—was *surveillance*. Realizing that the Humans were likely to stir up trouble, they kept an eye on the Earthworlds.

They also followed the activity of a strange enemy at work opposed to both Celestials and Architects. Of their many operatives to come to Sol, the telepathic Rakshi emerged from the caliginous Aeon of Gnosis cult in odd cube ships. From their imposing fortresses on Yf they shared power and the knowledge of forging weapons with devious and dishonest men while killing or enslaving their opposers. The Rakshi kept themselves alive for long years by sending their corrupt spirits into chosen Human bodies, a power wielded in the Temple of the Flame by means of the technocultic Rod and Crown artifacts. But the deposed king roused his people, slicing limbs and smashing heads until finally driving the Rakshi offworld. The Humans' victory seemed promising at first until the Q'rel saw how the Rakshi's wicked teachings of hierarchy were not discarded, as they aught to have been, but preserved, spreading like a plague until all of

[75] A smaller lab on the second planet, Altair Crusis, attempted to unravel the mysteries of Splendid Ap, until the cybernetic brain overseeing it grew deranged and departed on a quest for galactic domination.

Sol was polluted by it. This was further proof that the abhorrent race of Mankind had to be eradicated before the galaxy was infected by the ideology of superiority.

But the Q'rel had long suspected this when first the Darkness arrived, and despite their disinclination to help the Humans, they were wise enough to recognize this enemy was the greater threat. And so they went to the northern pole of Urthha, and there in the deepest waters, they and their engineered servants raised up a colossal city from which they would watch and oppose the coming minions and cohorts of evil:

> First were the arcane, volatile, and volant Polypous known as the Flying Polyps. Amorphous predators, they were sent forth by the Ancient Ones to Yaksh, Yith, and Tund, but on Urthha they built their black basalt towers and waited, for there they had a single-minded mission to hunt and kill the Humans.
>
> The malevolent Xothians are the winged, octopoid Star-spawn of Typhojem who'd secretly leagued with a faceless god in the form of a crawling mist, and Urthha was his hidden enterprise. The Star-spawn could freeze all upon whom they glared, leaving their minds and organs active. They were sent in secret so that Tilotny did not destroy them, though they were opposed by the D'mi'go and Q'rel.
>
> The fungoid D'mi'go (sometimes known as Mi-Go) are the technologically-sophisticated Brain Hunters of Astor the Ochre King ostensibly sent to oppose the Celestials but secretly tasked by their master to target the two Fanged Gods and prepare worlds and minds for his coming. With membranous wings, ellipsoid heads, and crustaceanoid bodies, they had the rare ability to fly through space at tremendous velocities, first taking Mygeeto (from which it is believed the name of these Outer Ones derives) and establishing their capital at Yugami.[76]

The D'mi'go came to be secret agents of yet another power, for they had come to love the Night Queen who loyally served the Architects. Their success in capturing the impossibly angled Glimmering Stone, which gave them the ability to cross dimensions, led to open rebellion against the Lord of the Planes when he discovered their treason. Swearing to destroy every last member of their race, he sent his yellow Kawangi to hunt them. But the D'mi'go had protection from the Old Ones—to whom they first passed the Glimmering Stone—and so the Spawn of the Old Ones would attack the servants of the mad Ochre King wherever they found them.

The Glimmering Stone was a mercurial artifact, a shining trapezohedron that, for Thargorograht, showed a window unto all space and time. After seeing into it, she instructed her adroit son, Atlachnacha, to expand the massive numinous web of the Great Black Nest beyond Illathurion into the Dreamlands. For Typhojem, it had connected him to the central malevolent figure of the Outer Gods, to whom he would now pay furtive allegiance. For Ooradryl, it showed the secrets of the dark and the

means by which his brood might escape Illathurion. But the stone also made Wutzek aware of them, which gave them pause, and, as it would not work for them a second time, it was decided to leave the artifact on Urthha as a lure. In this way, the Q'rel came to possess and gaze upon it… *and a mesmeric red eye gazed back*.

The third part of the Q'rel's plan was the *construction of devices*. Into such they now poured their great intellect and energy. Their earlier robot creations were harmless enough, with various models designed to provide general technical and labor assistance. Considerably less advanced than the Osserians' Keeper or the Mu-Abin's offspring races, yet still designed on the principles of nonviolence, as the Q'rel's mental and spiritual states declined, so too did their Mechanical Men, and many were repurposed for combat and disseminated into the galaxy.

But the Q'rel's crowning monstrosity was a thirty-three-thousand-kilometer-wide supercomputer that could create matter out of conscious thought. This was accomplished by means of the Marouflets that they'd captured… or, more specifically, the brains of the poor monkeys; such madness was justified on the grounds that the creatures were little more than beasts. That these would later become Nightmare Demons may have had a impact on the nickname of their supercomputer, which came to be called the Nightmare Machine. Under the direction of Ascendent Kel'tarcPei, the Q'rel generated bizarre biological entities, the most significant of which were the multicellular, protoplasmic slaves called Shoggoths. These would not only aid in the construction of hidden cities around the galaxy from which they could strike against their growing number of enemies, but they could be turned to a doughty force of killers and sent against the dreary denizens of Illathurion.

When first seeing the stomach-wrenching, mind-turning, formless protoplasms, Ascendent Hornth Orntary quarreled fervently with Ascendent Kel'tarcPei. "Can you not see that we have gone too far? Crossed lines from which we cannot return? Meddled with things we aught not to have? Broken vows to the Eternal?"

"Yes," Kel'tarcPei said. "That is exactly what we've done. It is what we had to do to defeat such formidable adversaries and save the galaxy. And now you shudder and carp. Leave Altair 4. Go back to Q'rul, all of you who agree with this craven perspective. Meanwhile, we will do the hard tasks that you cannot!"

"Tell me in truth, who is it you speak to in the shining stone? What is it that haunts the corridors when all are asleep? Who is the skinless man that whispers in the night?"

But these queries only made Kel'tarcPei angry. "I think it is best that you leave now. Go and cower in the shadows while we accomplish what no others have. Hide if you must. Beg the Celestials for forgiveness. Ask the pardon of your offspring races, for you will find none here."

"Very well," rejoined Orntary haughtily, "and when you've become the enemy yourself, it is *you* who we will have to deal with!"

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[76] Mygeeto was known as Myggoth. Yugami was known as Yuggoth (literally "yoke of the masters"). The D'mi'go would later be preyed upon by the felinoid Pursians on the adjacent world Pursin.

Orntary left with a number of others who felt as he did, and upon arriving home, they immediately began the production of special weapons by which to protect themselves against the preternatural forces that Kel'tarcPei would soon unleash, and in this way were the powerful Glaives brought into being.

The final step in their plan came in the years after the Architects first announced themselves. On Notron, they had discovered that the goddess Via was the very same being as Onrai the Architect. But to this information, the Celestials had only said, "Wisdom and truth in abundance we have given, but the people believe what they wish to believe."

The fourth part of their plan was called *invitation*. When at last the Q'rel were convinced that they'd attained the pinnacle of their scientific achievements, they lured the Architects to Altair 4 by the means prescribed by Onrai. "Now will the Architects be eradicated by the dreambeasts of their own minds!" Kel'tarcPei exclaimed.

When the Architects arrived, the Q'rel engaged the device which began generating forms from the phantasy of their targets' subconscious minds, finding equivalent substance out of illusion so as to bring potency to hellish vision, causing a host of terrifying and infernal Dreambeasts to storm out of the void!

But rather than cause fear, Tilotny was affronted: "*More* infernal beasts? What a waste of talent!"

Cold Danda Sine was amused: "It *is* something new for them!" His eyes gleamed red.

Splendid Ap was fascinated: "Before us preponderates a state of aptitudinal amelioration such has seldom been descried amongst even our supernal progeny."

"Seek…" Tilotny commanded the Infernal Beasts rushing forward.

"And destroy," Cold Danda Sine added, laughing as he turned the nightmare army upon its creators. The Infernal Beasts tore into the Q'rel with abandon, taking sustenance from their fear. When but ten percent of the Q'rel on Altair 4 were left, Tilotny commanded the creatures to halt and the machine shut down.

"The apparatus has been rendered abeyant," Ap informed her.

"So you are bent on *vengeance*," Tilotny addressed the terrified vestige of the Q'rel. "Good! We have use for ones such as you. Transport them."

"I have transferred them to one of our worlds in Illathurion," Cold Danda Sine said after they'd vanished. "Typhojem will likely wish to deploy them, for he has been pestering me to bring him an Elder Race that he could put to good use. He thinks he acts in secret, but we know what it is he really desires…"

"He tests my forbearance," Tilotny remarked, "but for now he serves our purpose."

"What of the machine?" Ap inquired. "I have pierced its workings, and I perceive that it is not quite the axiomatic inducer of ectoplasmic modeling the Q'rel presupposed it to be, but rather the erector of a vibrantly perforating cavity that magnetically draws eidolons of comparable temperament."

"It will be here if we ever have use of it," Tilotny stated before they departed.

So, the Nightmare Machine remained unknown on the Forbidden Planet for long years, hidden underground until the arrival, several centuries later, of United Planets cruiser *C-57D*; an investigative team from Urthha would find a lost colony and the

accursed Q'rel laboratory and destroy it. And with the story of the Nightmare Machine entering legend, several attempted to replicate it in the aeons that followed.[77]

Under dense shadow, Typhojem visited the Q'rel on Thule, a world named in honor of his son, Mhu'anThul, where once dwelt the Tholians.[78] Casting a spell of sleep over them, he stripped away all memory of their past as an Elder Race, but not their knowledge or abilities, and renamed them the Cthol (or Kathol) after himself. Then, taking some back to Altair 4, he commanded them to use their powers to engineer for him new servitor races. To help them achieve this, he gave them Jostran slaves.[79]

As to the Q'rel still fighting on Urthha, they would be driven into the oceans' depths after the Pan-preneur arrived. This Precursor race was appalled by the underground Q'rel cities created with the aid of their Shoggoths. Even more disturbing than this protoplasmic brood was the mad self-aggrandizement of the Q'rel, who had been their brethren and who had fallen so far as to consume Human flesh and proclaim themselves their ancient makers! Refusing to refer to them any longer as an Elder Race, the Pan-preneur branded them *Elder Things,* and against them they declared war! The early battles inspired the ominous Shoggoths to turn on the Q'rel and flee to other worlds and planes. Meanwhile, the Ssither had come to Urthha and stolen the Glimmering Stone that the Q'rel had with them.

Unbeknownst to all but a few, the Architects and others ensured that the enemy forces did not unite, and it was for this reason that, despite being targeted by powerful and malignant minds, the Humans had not been wiped out.

As it was, most remained blissfully unaware of the conflicts that occurred in the remote parts of their world, under the waves, and in mammoth caverns deep beneath their feet, though a handful would come to discover glimpses of them. Had the masses seen such things so far beyond the parameters of their limited imaginations, they'd have been driven mad, for such was the fate of those unlucky few who glimpsed the incomprehensible visions, who descended the endless stair beneath the City of Pillars, who inscribed the tormenting, blasphemous words croaked by invisible things with eyes that burned of hatred and ill-will.

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[77] Borborygmus Gog used the concept as an entertaining attraction on Hologram Fun World. Another Nightmare Machine was created by the Sobekk to debilitate their victims by means of a device that generated intense guilt; this was akin to the powers later developed by the Guild of Vindicators.

[78] Other planets were named in honour of Mhu'anThul, including an ancient northern continent on Urthha, inhabited by the Voormis thralls of the Serpent People, Thule Minor near Cyrannis, Ultima Thule near Corona V, and Thule in the Esstran sector, though there were some in these times who believed these malevolent places were all connected.

[79] Due to the many limbs and digits of the Kathol, their dating system is radically different from our own, but the same humanocentric historians of the Hemes Arbora that produced the erroneous spelling "Kathol" mistranslated the date as 10,000 years (corrected in the new chronology as 4,250 BBY). A closer look into the origins of Succate and the Hemes Arbora shows that the popular history books released on Terminus before the demise of the Old Republic stem from sinister connections to the Acolytes of Dread Rur who fostered misinterpretations and confident assertions that the Sith species died out after the Great Hyperspace War, while exaggerating ages on the Sith king lists to mythic proportions, proposing that Naga Sadow reigned for 20,000 years.

THE BEAST OF Q'RUL

The Infernal Beasts of the Nightmare Machine would not remain in Illathurion for long. "A door will soon open," said a voice in the darkness to Septeraery, the anointed leader of the Infernal Beasts. "Find your makers and all the Q'rel not under Typhojem's dominion. Once you have killed them, take the Earthworlds!"

A remnant of the Jostran had taken refuge on Geognôsis, meanwhile They'd initially been welcomed by their Greedle allies who took pity on them due to the fact that the Jostran homeworld of Kiilpar had been taken over by the Rafa and their Human servants. But the Jostran hid the fact that they'd earlier resettled on Munlali Mafir, and the Greedle would come to rue their compassion and trust when the Jostran took their queen hostage.

Following this outrage, the Jostran explained. Their failed attempt to make themselves into a great power came as a crushing blow to them, particularly with so many of their rulers having been killed. But even the wars couldn't account for the mysteryous disappearance of so many of their people. "But your scientists are renowned for their skills. Track down our missing people!" The Greedle were not pleased with these demands, but having little choice in the matter they accepted the challenge.

The scientists hoped that by developing a more sophisticated Jumpgate, they could trace the large-scale movement of anyone that resembled the Jostran and then open a bridge to whatever world they'd vanished to. And when at long last they succeeded and the newly-developed tracking system worked, the Jostran celebrated. Even the Geognôsians were pleased. And so they had the Jumpgate open a conduit to the world where the lost Jostran had gone, unaware that they'd been taken as slaves to Thule. Before they could even send scouts to retrieve them, out poured the ebon form of Septeraery!

The killing of the Geognôsian queen and subjugation of everyone else followed, for the Infernal Beasts were giant in stature and merciless in disposition, and it seemed that none could oppose them. The Geognôsians bowed before him, and so most were spared and tasked with constructing his Black Fortress. The Jostran were placed inside Geognôsian jars until the "Brain Worms," as the Infernal Beasts referred to that race on Thule, could be put into the bodies of Human corpses to build his army of Slayers.

Septeraery's march to domination began on unaligned worlds as he continued to seek out the whereabouts of the Q'rel—for the Infernal Beasts had not forgotten to visit death upon their progenitors—and the torture and death of the Shifala sharif soon enough revealed the ancestral homeworld of Q'rul, which at this time was known as Krull.

But to his irritation, the Q'rel were gone, having long ago departed for war with the D'mi'go who'd been harassing a Lurmen colony on Mygeeto. As a symbolic gesture, the Beast, for this is what the Shifala ruler had called him, took the world for his own and waited for the Q'rel to return home. With only a few hapless Human kingdoms on Q'rul, he would dominate them and take their royal princesses with which to produce royal offspring that he'd install as kings over the various worlds he'd conquer.

But in his hubris, the Beast could not fathom defeat. A band of warriors and wizards, intent on saving the abducted princess from the Black Fortress, marched across deadly terrain to retrieve the rare weapon that had been passed down their line of

kings to overcome this terrible adversary, and although many did not survive, their wit, courage, and the aid of the Glaive ensured that the Beast met his doom!

With Septeraery destroyed, the new Geognôsian Empress sent her forces to capture all the remaining Jostran on Geognôsis, after which she ascended the ancestral throne and declared to all her peoples: "Never again will the Greedle race be subservient to others! As our cousins, the Poldt, had also thought to deceive us, for which reason they were banished underground, so too will the Jostran be punished!" The Jostran listened impotently to the cheers elicited by this speech from the containment fields into which they'd been placed. "As you once made us your slaves, now you shall be enslaved! Gods you are *not*, nor even *Jostran* any longer, but perhaps as *Brain Worms* will you prove useful to our great society!" As the Infernal Beast had done before, they placed the Jostran into their fallen warriors, animating the dead as zombie slaves. So did the Greedle culture fall into darkness just as the *Geonosian Empire* rose into a formidable force who ruled from across the Translucent Sea and into the stars.

LORDS OF THE SEVEN KINGDOMS

Ere the coming of war, the united Prira Cen and Quiru mages had gathered vast armies to defend their adopted world. But it was learned that Vulthoom, the Wizards of Caer dhu, and the terrible Sarmaks of Sarm had combined their dark arts to create vicious and violent hybrids, ravening armies of lionlike Banths, skeleton-like Morgors, Sith hornets, vampiric Plant Men, revolting Apts, spiderlike Noltai, and foul Parths. Into the dark, Vulthoom released the Grues, and the Sarmaks sent forth their mutated offspring. Seth warlocks and witches came too, those whom the natives called Corphals.

This prompted the Firstborn leaders to use their conjoined gifts to bring forth a stronger army that could match their forces. When the call went out, many volunteers came and brought to the capital their beasts. From this union emerged the amplified variants. They were often six-limbed, such as the Zatyr (Green Men), Ushongti, and Ilthur apes of Aihai, as well as the Formians, Sabits, Whistling Bees, and Blue Apes of Sfanomoë. But the Blue Warriors, Centaurs, and Pellucidar Ants were unhelpful and, rather than destroy them, they were sent to Urthha.

With adversaries descending on them like locusts on ripened fields, the Quiru and Prira Cen severed heads in the misty forests and spilt blood on the broad plains, and through it all, they and their armies battled as one, devastating the invidious fiends and causing those which remained to go into hiding.

The Quiru and Prira Cen celebrated their victory in marriage alliances, and the indigenous races new and old hailed them as Lords of the Seven Kingdoms—for they came to rule half of Aihai from the great cities of Jekkara, Jahar, Shondakar, Rhiannon, Ruh, Sark, and Sinharat. But Vulthoom yet reigned in Ignar-Vath, on the eastern side of the great Yahan Canal, and the haunted gulf of Chaur was a place of horror where dwelt the Eidolon of the Blind. And in Yoh-Vombis, the Yorhis were nearly wiped out by the nameless leech-things, leaving only the Aihai branch alive. Although the Enemy had lost the first major battle on this world, the war would go on, for the Dark Lords would tolerate no union between the Sephi and the Eruthros, who

might by their strength influence others. So, with their slithering servants and droning pets, the Enemy passed like smoke through the lands, corrupting the peoples, so that in time even the name of the world reflected the Dark Lord with its moons called the Eyes of Thar.[80]

The Lords of the Seven Kingdoms permitted mating with Humans and near-Humans alike. Their children emerged in different colored variations, though several remained oviparous. The first sign of trouble came when the haughty First Born separated themselves, preferring Issus and the illusion of preeminence. The Orovar soon followed. And as the generations passed, the others also foolishly aligned themselves by skin-color, engendering disparate clans.[81]

Perceiving grave conflicts ahead, the tuskless, two-armed blue and violet-skinned offshoot of the Zatyr reared by the Prira Cen departed Aihai through its Hypergate to establish a peaceful civilization on Tammuz-an, the name they yet call themselves to this day. A shorter, four-armed race migrated to a world in the Senex sector that they would christen Nars, while a pugnacious six-armed variety were exiled to Ebra.

The royal heirs of the Lords of the Seven Kingdoms spread their influence to other worlds in the system, gifting the loyal Calots they brought about to the Orovar to serve as pets and guardians. But their deeds were not always as altruistic as they might have been. Upon the cloud-covered world of Sfanomoë (what Urthhans referred to as Venus, different natives called Amtor, Zarovia, or Sha-ardol), the Prira Cen usurped rule of the capital at Reabon from the Cansins, claiming it was for the good of the people. The Cansins were an offspring race of the Firstborn Sholam, but they deferred and heralded their new lords as the Cloud People.

But not every interaction went as smoothly, and ever there is a cost to the upset of balance. When the Prira Cen mated with the attractive Sea-Folk, who were the amphibious offspring of the Sunesi, who dwelt in the buoyant, gaseous Red Sea beyond the Mountains of White Cloud, some of their children were born with the Force gifts of their forebears. But many were not. And in wroth did the latter regard the former.

Another troubled royal lineage were the prideful and power-hungry Lhari who had been driven out of the High Plateaus for their cruelty. To revenge themselves on their Lotharian elders, the Lhari began searching for the ancient technology of the Sholam that had long been rumored to be hidden on Sfanomoë. The salamander-like Precursor race had departed that world prior to the Empyrean Wars. They had indeed hidden a Cosmonium-based device with which one could create a powerful race of warriors. Though the wicked Lhari would be brought to their end, the secrets of the Sholam were known by the Lotharians who would later bring about a Champion to heal Aihai. And much later, it would found by the Zanibar and put to evil use by their offspring race to bring forth the Eternal Empire.

Lady Illia Amm was Primeval of the Neti. When she returned to this system to search for Lord Lleowll, she was surprised to a changed world governed by Firstborn factions who ruled as System Lords seeking after the longevity they'd lost. Going before

[80] Vulthoom, derived from *Vol-thum/dum*, means "Complete Power or Authority." The *Bar* prefix changes it to "Gate of Power," though the alteration to –sum/soom softens it to "Gate of the Border."
[81] The Aihai and Green Men were seen as too alien-looking for Human tastes.

the Lords of the Seven Kingdoms, she delivered unto them a scathing denunciation and prophecy: "You know that all but the Resolute will taste death, yet you use your power and authority to grasp after an impossible immortality."

"You think yourself wise," one of the Lords replied, "but what know you of these lands you forsook and our travails upon it? Of the terrible battles we fought? Of the nations who begin to mistrust and turn against us? Of the eyes in darkness that never sleep? Of our waning youth and innocence turning to dust? Turn your wrath instead upon the beings who'd traversed the oceans of space to crawl upon these worlds and who yet lie hidden. Or upon wicked sorcerers like Alendar of the Minga, the former ruler of Xiccarph, known once as Maal Dweb, who breeds, sells, and partakes of the most exquisite and arrestingly beautiful women in his castle on the edge of Shaardol's roiling Greater Sea? You have been gone a *long* time, Lady Amm."

With a sigh, she replied, "I am not blind to such travails nor unsympathetic. You have used your power to defend these worlds, but power is a double-edged blade that once wielded is difficult to lay down. I know only this: If you continue to seek immortality, you will bring upon this world that you so love a great calamity that will see you, your children, and your children's children perish. With the passing of a comet and the rise of great heat, you will know then that my words have come to pass."

Grieved by this prognostication, the elder royal line of the Quiru left for the far extremes to contemplate these matters. Building domed cities in the polar ice caps from where they would construct great marvels, it was hoped that the Thinkers—as they came to be called—might forestall the coming doom.

Lady Amm continued her search for Lord Lleowll, but he could not be found, nor did the Lords know of his whereabouts or that now called himself Prince Thagordenia. Having turned to darkness, he leagued himself with a necromancer who, in exchange for length of life, provided the corrupt Neti his own pocket dimension and a line of Purple Priestesses with whom to lure succulent victims to his lair.

The final task Lady Amm accomplished before returning to Mucuairt (later Mukura) was to deal with some of the hidden threats that the Lords had spoken of. The Neti had no power to destroy the sepulchral Dark Lords. But she could do she did.

Together with the Lords of the Seven Kingdoms, the members of the three Elder Races weaved an arcane enchantment of *somnifer daemonium* around the cold gray gods hidden on these worlds. The one known as Pharol to the Quiru and Vulthoom to the Martians was cursed to sleep, as were Saig and Lsa, awakening only once every thousand years. They would not remain prisoned forever, however, for the Purple Priestess and her dancers proffered sacrifice at the rising of the Mad Moon.

The centuries passed, and as Lady Amm had feared came to pass. The Lords grew fearful of old age and death as a thing to be abhorred, and so they channeled all their energy and thought upon its obviation. Eventually, unable to draw upon their diminishing vitality, the Lords of the Seven Kingdoms began to siphon power from Aihai itself. They even drew life from the Sun in exchange for a seed.[82]

[82] And from the flames of its Firebird came forth a child, a Hephaestian planetoid covered in dense elements, circling its parent nearer than Mercury and dreaming of amusements. She called herself Aryl.

But Death cannot be cheated. The comet hailed the end. When the five oceans began drying up, canals and waterways were built over and extended from the natural cracks on the planet's surface to help usher precious water from the polar ice caps. These had been conceived by the Thinkers and although only a stop-gap measure to forestall catastrophic collapse, it worked for a time.

And that is when the Enemy struck! The Prira Cen were attacked and overthrown by the serpentine Sorcerers of the Lost Islands and their raiders.[83] When all hope was lost, they sought to preserve themselves, oblivious as to how this process would render them into flesh-eating mummies. But the Serpent-mages had a hand in this as well. The Dhuvians then moved to take the Seven Kingdoms by manipulating the tainted Human Empire of Sark to fight a great battle against the free peoples of Khondor. Their victory would not long last. With the aid of the Swimmers and Sky Folk, the Khondor crushed the heads of the Serpent People, instigating some to go underground and others to flee to the worlds of Jatee and Davnar, which Dhuvians called *Dhuvnar*.[84] Several races realigned for the first time in centuries, such as the Orovar, First Born, and Okarian, producing a latent red-skinned variant from their Quiru forebears.

But as resources grew scarce and the atmosphere tenuous, the Ilthur turned feral, and the Zatyr, then in great numbers, would no longer serve; they turned on the Humans, taking their cities at the same time as the Orovars broke off their alliance. Only the efforts of scientists working to complete the atmosphere plant saved the world. But it was not enough to stop the fall of great kingdoms as various races were reduced to isolated city-states or roving bands of refugees. The Swimmers could not survive the drying of the ocean beds, while the Sky Folk would diminish in size and number. Conquest became the dominant way of life, as the Green Men split into warring tribes and the Red Martians ascended to power, unwittingly manipulated by the cannibalistic Thern cult who were themselves manipulated by the First Born.

In desperation to hold on to their dwindling kingdom and lives, the Ramas (who descended from the fallen Lords) listened to the voice in the darkness. Henceforth, those in the Technics Guild were led to experiment in the making of abominations while the Lords of Sinharat obtained objects of terrible power from the Temple of the Flame before the Fortress of the Rakshi was destroyed. The pilfered Rod and Crowns were priceless tools of *mind-exchange* by which they could live on indefinitely, taking the youthful bodies of the so-called lesser races, lending Sinharat an evil reputation until the Ramas were at last overthrown.

Most of the once-grand capitals now lie forsaken, haunted by long centuries and dark deeds, or buried deep under the sands, covered by later cities and now lost to memory. New cities rose—Yorn and its vassal nations of Greater and Lesser Helium, Karathor, and Ptarth—while ancient cities declined or changed hands.

Of the barbarian tribes descended from the Khondor, the northern Taarak tribe alone remained noble, heeding the voice of those they called the Angels who spurred

[83] The Raiders were led by Tobul. The Prira Cen, now mainly Human, albeit with golden eyes and blue hair, were led by Kymra. At one time, Tobul and Kymra had been in love.
[84] Davnar was inhabited by the avian Kalidor from Otherspace; they did not take part in the wars.

them on to wisdom and equanimity. Gifted with strength and vision, the Taarak would go on to become one of the galaxy's greatest Defenders.[85]

Into a civilization on the edge of ruin came that of which the known stories tell: a princess from amongst the people, an honorable outsider from a realm beyond, and a noble Green Man; together, they restored cooperation, peace, and balance by means of a Confederation of City-States that helped save Aihai from all but the greed of the Urthhan corporations, who came two centuries later to exploit the world. Though stronger cities could keep the colonizers at bay, with Jahar in ruins and barbarian tribes in the north, the southern hemisphere's cities straddling the equator on the shores of the White Sea could not… and ever did the Serpent Men stir in the shadows.

HUNTERS OF THE ELIXIR

To appease the Jen'ari, who demanded tribute, the Ssither and Kissai Priests genetically alchemized a warrior race from genetic samples of Taung, Feeorin, and Quarren and trained them to be fighters. The Disciples of the Unseen Queen would periodically visit Drômencas to oversee this and ensure their fidelity, forcing the warriors to feign servitude as they endured, learned, and waited for the opportunity to escape.

A slave revolt by Herglics, Miraluka, and Mrlssi (enslaved with their Mrissi cousins) presented the very diversion they needed to turn on their Massassi guards, steal the very ships they'd been trained to fly, and escape through the gate to the jungles and swamps of Hishyim in the Outer Rim. There they renamed themselves the Hish, which simply meant "the People," intending to live quiet lives far from the conflicts of the galaxy and the specter of the Black Warrior that represented death.

But furious at their escape, the Night Queen ordered a resourceful insectoid race, the Amengi of Mengjini, to retrieve her promised vassals for whom she had plans.

While yet carving out their new society under the auspices of their eldest members, whom they called the Ancients, the Hish came under attack. The enemy's superior numbers and weaponry made it clear that once again they must dissemble until the time was right. But the cockroach-like Amengi did not reveal their success to the Night Queen, thinking to keep the slaves for themselves, knowing that with the ongoing war, Thargorograht had far more pressing concerns and would eventually call off the search.

So well did their slaves pretend to be broken that it took only a relatively short time for an albino Hish named Kaail to assess the situation, come up with the best strategy, and overthrow their smug and supercilious oppressors. After a considerable slaughter, the Amengi bowed in defeat and acceded to being enslaved.

The re-formed Council of Ancients made new decrees. To ensure they did not fall to indolence in a galaxy at war, they became a culture of conquerors. To ensure they did not fall to arrogance, they developed strict codes of conduct. To ensure they would be dominant, they traveled to different worlds to learn and grow. Thereafter, they would

[85] *Tar-ak* meant the "House of Tears" or "House of Drink"; *Taarak*, from *Taa-Rakhi*, means "Guardian."

be the *Hish'qu'ten*, the "people who take territory," and *E'Yautja*, "the predators" not prey, for they would never again be humiliated, enslaved, or treated as lessers.[86]

Amongst the earliest planets they came upon were those sparsely populated worlds that the Jostran had years earlier seeded with Human slaves, most of whom had by this time been reduced to primitive societies. Some fought back, but some were eager for anyone who might free them from their yoke and so paid obeisance to the E'Yautja. Enjoying this deification, they instructed their Human slaves to construct temples for them, such as on Terra I. Though their exteriors bore resemblance to the Sith ones they knew from Drômencas, they had no interest in esoteric magic. Instead, they served as arenas where they could test their mettle, often using Humans as prey in these contests since there were occasions in which the Humans won, making them worthy foes.

The Sith had not forgotten their runaway slaves, but engaged as they were in more crucial tasks, they hired the Malak to capture them. The Malak were the offspring race of the Firstborn Krevaaki. As several Precursor races had done, the Krevaaki fashioned their later offspring in homage to the Humans when first they discovered the presence of that race. And so skillful had the Malak been at terraforming that the Krevaaki gave their offspring the name Ossians, meaning "like unto the Osserians." For a time, they thrived on their world of Ossia, which they'd made into a paradise.

This would all change with the Empyrean Wars.

The Priors of Ossia were outraged at the reports of despoliation and genocide in the years leading up to the war, for they knew the delicate craftsmanship involved in worldbuilding and could not stand to see that bellicose race—which they'd been shaped in imitation of—plundering worlds and spreading conflict in their wake.

Despite several pleas on the part of the Ossians, the Krevaaki refused to do anything about them. Guilt-ridden for having earlier joined the Judicious, they insisted instead on a steadfast course of peace, patience, and tolerance, saying they must leave retribution to the Father of Lights. The Krevaaki recommended instead that the Ossians might sublimate their indignation and put their gifts to good use by repairing some of the damage the Humans had done.

The Ossian Priors kept their counsel. They did not have the faith of their elder Progenitors, and the people grumbled amongst themselves that the Architects might be right about the Precursors holding back things from them. Nevertheless, the Priors went forth to re-terraform Cobol, the Earthworld first ruined by the Humans. It is said that they did not come back the same… for there, upon the shores of Lake Kobalos, an invitation was made, and an answer given.

The Priors returned to Ossia. Donning the ceremonial panoply of the Krevaaki, Prior Erlich D'yahn stood before the astonished and curious people and announced the following: "We will no longer be known as the Ossians of Ossia but the Malak of Mala, for never again will we pay obeisance to the deceiving Celestials or listen to the misled Krevaaki; rather, we will obey the truth that is Life and Death, and we will be its Messengers. Any who wish to run back to the arms of our deluded makers may do so, but if you stay, it will be to help bring about the end of the despoilers of

[86] The *E* serves as the definite article, but as the language grew less formal over time, it was dropped.

this galaxy. Our mission begins on Septevorres!" When this speech was ended, the people rose up as one and cheered.

Septevorres in the Antemeridian Sector had been but a lonely world the Krevaaki utilized for reflection and supplication. Now, with battles raging across the stars, it was utilized as a necropolis for the region, for which reason it came to be known as the World of the Seven Graves… And there was buried the rare Cosmonium.

In the wake of the Grieving, many of the Progenitor races had lost their natural ability to create offspring races, and the Elixir of Animation was the means by which they could continue to do so. Each particular formula included the distilled unguent of Cosmonium, a rare substance generated organically on several worlds, which provided the quintessence of the Living Force manifest as a kind of spirit-embued nectar to which they added the essence of their individual race. After the Darkening, the chosen of the Resolute were tasked to gather Cosmonium and cast it into a hidden pocket-dimension, for it had the ability to bestow endless life, for which reason some would later call it the Water of Immortality. But the Krevaaki had already buried their lot on Septevorres after a mischief of Jenets had been led to Krevas.

The Jenets were themselves no threat, but one of their number had been infected by Mnggal-Mnggal. This went unknown until the immense protean mass of metamorphosing cancerous tissue began sprouting endless arms, appendages, and a multitude of eyes. As the Cancer God burst forth to turn all living things on Krevas into parts of itself, the Krevaaki intervened, trapping the Horror and burning it to ash. Ascertaining that it took only one drop of its blood, one surviving piece of tissue, for it to infect another and begin the cycle again, they thoroughly inspected the remaining Jenets and sent the healthy ones on their way to Garban and then went about cleansing their city.

Fearing their sacred solution had been contaminated, they buried the unguent deep underground where none would find it, unaware that their fallen Ossian offspring had been watching from afar as they did so. But the Malak no longer believed the stories of the Krevaaki, concluding that they'd concocted some elaborate monster-fable to scare away any who might think to pry into their affairs. So a team of their most skilled scouts came to Septevorres and dug up the enigmatic unguent.

The betrayal of the Ossian race was a blow to the Krevaaki as it was to all of the Elder Races who lost children in the war, but with the added theft of the Cosmonium, the Krevaaki took on the full burden of guilt, punishing themselves for having failed so terribly. Re-dedicating themselves to stopping their offspring at any and all costs, they arrived on Mala. Their coming was a surprise to the Malak, for their parent race had been of the Resolute. But seeing their fury and power unleashed, the Priors ordered an evacuation, leaving behind a significant vanguard to keep the Krevaaki occupied while the rest escaped. Ruefully did the Malak flee their paradise world, but they operated craftily, dispersing the precious substance into different containers so that when the Krevaaki, after leveling the vanguard, managed to retrieve the original container, they knew not if more remained at large. And for years they would hunt for it.

With the escalation of the Empyrean Wars and their desire for greater knowledge and resources, Malak specialists in different branches went to work immediately after settling a new homeworld. While the Mala'rak Forerunners and Hunters hired them-

selves out to the Sith in exchange for valuable secrets and resources, Mala'kak Pilots and Engineers went in search of worlds and specimen upon which to experiment; this was done in an attempt to engineer a race of combatants who would fight on the front lines against their adversaries. Results they disliked were left for the Krevaaki or unleashed on Humans, including a pathogen sent to Corona V and the rapidly breeding Ghigerrans (farmed from Yautja genes) whose DNA was sent to Terra I.

Their greatest successes were the Irrukiine, crafted from Hanadak, Wyrwulves, and the apes of Irudiru; and these were gifted to the Sith, who employed them as sentinels and soldiers. But the Malak would find hunting the E'Yautja far more difficult. Cannier and more adept at this deadly game, the E'Yautja turned things on their head, laying traps for the Hunters while infusing themselves with their genetic material to enhance their strength, dexterity, and intelligence, a practice they'd begun with the best of their prey. Refusing to accept defeat at the hands of runaway slaves, the Engineers developed an aggressive endoparasitoid species with a protective exoskeleton and hive-mind. If *they* could not kill the E'Yautja, *these would!*

Under the leadership of their Lord Predator, the E'Yautja enjoyed testing their mettle against these new serpentine foes—even managing to capture a queen for their own breeding experiments. But the creatures proved far deadlier than either race had anticipated, outsmarting their opponents and escaping into the galaxy to colonize a world of their own—the first of many. Queens and giant Empresses of this xenomorphic race would lay thousands of eggs on numerous ships and worlds, and these would lie in wait until the host bodies of suitable sentients appeared. As if this was not calamitous enough, the nightmarish creatures could take on the attributes of their prey so that future Queens learned how to telepathically direct their guardians, warriors, and drones, and even influence potential hosts through dreams and nightmares.

In response, the E'Yautja and Malak struck a truce to defeat the monstrous aliens, but even that would not avail them before the detestable Drukathi. A plenipotent, six-legged canid race, they easily swept aside the E'Yautja and Malak and began breeding the creatures for their own occluded purposes. Finally, with a host of eggs and young queens in tow, they returned to Illathurion on their biotechnological, sluglike ships.

In the aftermath The Malak would return to their sinister schemes. The E'Yautja abandoned Hishyim for new hunting grounds seeded by the Drukathi in the Unknown Regions, but ever kept a watchful eye for the return of that fearsome enemy.

At this time, the Priors were looking to expand their borders. Forerunners had come upon several Human colonies on Antemeridias and Prishardia, where they discovered the same thing the E'Yautja had earlier learned: *Humans were in awe of them!* The solution to the scourge of Mankind would be far simpler than initially thought. It took only the fabrication of a myth of the Malak as Mankind's ancient gods. Several races and entities had made similar claims so as to more easily attain chattel, but the Malak bore considerable semblance to the Human form.

The ruse worked with some, but many were devoted to an invisible Supreme Maker, while others held devotion to Onrai or Via. So, the Malak endeavored to provide them a goddess, a Woman in the Dark to venerate! But whether from their experiments or their affront to the divine, the Malak lost their ability to reproduce. A small price to pay, some reasoned, for the transcendence that allowed them to become gods.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

THE DARKENING OF SKYRIVER

THE TRIAD OF DELUSION

It was a triumphant moment. The Great Gate was completed, and not a moment too soon. Terrifying races and unnamable organisms were emerging from the hidden Abyss and appearing across the expanse. War was upon them! And so the Triad—the three great races of the Vhorl, Xadow, and Xaxax—drew near to their apotheosis. With them had come several additional allied peoples who also wished to flee the galaxy in the midst of war, such as the Pa Tho in their intermediate stage.[87]

"Do you really believe we will be accepted?" the spider-like Xadow asked.

"Are we not magnificent deities like them? Can we not change forms at will?" explained the Vhorl, shifting shape from a cetacean to a winged humanoid. "Can you not travel through space without the use of a gate? Of course, they will accept us… and our allies."

"And if they do not?" the Xadow persisted.

"We are beings of pure will and thought. We require no permission."

"You are saying we will fight to take our place…"

"Let us hope it does not come to that."

The Great Gate had been designed by the so-called Great Ones as a Transdimensional Gate—one of the rare few—for the Seven had foolishly given the Triad the means by which to help develop such a thing. Of the Endless Speakers, only Lorian had not come to see them claim their place amongst the gods. He had been having misgivings ever since the Triad had begun in earnest to create the Great Gate that would bring them to the Unseen Realm of the Celestials. He had wanted them to be able to protect themselves against powerful adversaries—not storm the Gates of Heaven! The other six argued that what they did with the power given them was not the concern of others. Lorian had approached the Triad at that time: "Forsake this stratagem of yours," he'd warned, "for it will not end well." But they would not heed his words. "So be it. I see now that the Celestials were right; I depart for Xadadrond. There, in its black chasm will I live out my days in penance until my Maker calls me home, for it was I who steered you astray at the beginning."[88]

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[87] Not all of the Pa Tho joined them in this venture, nor was the galaxy aware of their three lifecycles, and so they were known by various names, such as the Walkers, the Sigmata, and the Tripods.

[88] Xadadrond was later called Xadum.

The moment had arrived. The opening of the now glowing Great Gate inspired in them awe, and despite whatever misgivings some may have felt, when at last it stood unsealed before them, the great ships of the Triad entered without hesitation…

Only to discover a nightmare! This was no Third Heaven, no Empyrean Realm, but a miasmal expanse of dyspathy and delirium, an evil demesne in opposition to life. It was not known if someone or something had tampered with the gate, only that it led to the strange vortices of Illathurion, from which burst vessels of death!

Within these were the Drach'nam and their miscegenated cousins who would take over La'drach and Xadum; the Zener who colonized Zender years before the Dargas settled the dust-choked world; the wicked Wurd who settled dark and frigid Werda; and the necromantic Xan of Xanthiir. But they were not the worst of it.

From out of the gloom came cackling, gilded cubes—Ooradryl, Nyeegath, Waru, and Uthoqquan! How the Kindred had coordinated their escape from the Ghooric Zone in which they'd made their dwelling was unknown; what was known was that they would break all who would not bend. To that end, dynamic waves of enervating thoughts assailed the terrified minds of the Triad and their makers, who saw them as the Hand of the Gods or the Hand of Death for those who would not submit.

The Triad turned and fled back through the gate, but many panicked and were destroyed in the outpouring of violence that ensued. The terror of Ooradryl's infernal hordes—combined with their powerful, mental infiltration—broke the three races of the Triad and those that had come with them.

The Endless Speakers looked on in horror. They could not now leave their offspring to be destroyed. But all their parries seemed vain and unhelpful. Still, they fought on.

What the Kindred accomplished next could not have come to pass had not the circumstances proved favorable for it. Unlike the Celestials of Skyriver, the Great Ones did not entirely dwell in this galaxy; they were the overseers of another realm where they had split their consciousness in order to come to Skyriver. The Seven had thought nothing of this, however, as they'd always been invulnerable, and so they failed to comprehend the compromised state they'd put themselves in, and how they might be vulnerable, for the desolate songs of the oppressors had begun!

They resisted; but the pressure mounted; they were weak, but still they would not give in; and so on; but so unbearable a pitch did the pressure reach that the consciousness of each of the six Great Ones was now split into two distinct parts. As their minds and hearts had already been divided between faithfulness and rebellion, between war and peace; between dismay and anger, so now they literally divided!

The first divided part of the six was drawn and subsumed into the blackness of Illathurion, taken as if by long spectral arms and pulled into the depths where they would never be seen in that form again.

The other division of six, witnessing the horror that had come upon their splintered halves, instinctually wove for themselves a crystallized cocoon around their spirits and fled to a safe and concealed haven in which they would survive.

In their realm of Oneirichor, their original forms remained intact, but now that they were trebled and cut off from the parts of themselves that had been splintered,

they became strange, moody, and melancholy, as if divorced from who they'd once been. Lorian would not know of it for some time, but in this state they were influenced by their dark sides, causing them at times to even pay heed to the Crawling Chaos, and at other times to withdraw, and this affected the Dreamlands over which they governed, for it was now more open to Nightmare and the realms beyond.

As for the Triad whose minds and spirits had been devastated by the Kindred, they yet retained their might, and as the Xadow now unleashed shocking firepower upon the Drach'nam, Zener, and Xan, the Vhorl resealed the Great Gate and joined them. Ooradryl and his siblings flew off with a host of new servants upon which they would later sate themselves and build their following. Seeing their backs, the invading races took that as a sign to depart as well.

The Vhorl took flight with the Great Gate, secreting it away to where none might come upon it. Ere their return to Vhorlin, the Xadow took note of their mental alteration and they wondered if the cube-monstrosities had taken their minds. For the Vhorl now spoke in a rigid manner, with a pedantic adherence to law and order that had not previously marked their character. When this was brought to their attention, they explained, "As fools did we behave, convinced that we had been worthy of entering the domain of the gods. We must prove ourselves now and follow the example of our makers." It would begin with the construction of organic living ships akin to what many of the Firstborn had grown. From these they would visit other races in need of "improvement," as they imagined they were in dire need of.

Of the species that caught their attention, the first was the near-Human Centaure who arose from a colony of Humans and Zon. This was in an era long before Centares fell to ruin, saw its moon destroyed, and became assimilated into Xim's Empire. The Vhorl gave the Centaure precognitive abilities, which helped make them successful but also proud. Now able to fight back against those who'd oppressed them, they engaged in a brutal war against the arrogant Zonian culture, a race of conquerors and hunters who also dwelt on Centares (which they called Zon). To punish those who'd copulated with Humans, the Zonian rulers had years earlier determined that their future offspring would be hatched in synthesis incubators that removed "defects" such as emotions. That the majority of the race came to lack sympathy and empathy made it easier for the Centaure to exterminate them entirely, leaving intact only the remnants of their civilization, their religion, wealth, and some of their cultural practices, which they'd years earlier adopted from their Zonian mates.

These events convinced the Vhorl that they needed to play a more active role in the affairs of those races they improved, and with that in mind, they gave the near-Human Mimbare from Mimban cranial and psionic augmentations. A spiritual people with a rigid caste society, the Mimbare conflated and syncretized their worship of Valeria with their Vhorl saviors. This gave the Vhorl the idea that they could better guide their newly developed races by using their shapeshifting abilities to impersonate the gods themselves. In order to be properly accepted as cosmic authority figures, they fabricated a history of their race as deities and demigods,

reasoning that although this was what the wicked Architects, Alterrans, Jostran, and Malak had done, they were doing it in the cause of good.

Unwilling to acknowledge that they were not thinking clearly or that the song of Nyeegath had left them obsessed with pride, mastery, discipline, and order—that which they deemed lacking in the galaxy and the cause of war—they went so far as to alter their own memories so that they would themselves believe the lie.

These acts deeply disturbed the Xadow, who had also suffered derangement, but the madness of Ooradryl was of a different kind than Nyeegath. When asked by the Vhorl why the words and actions of Xadow were now so strange, for they seemed possessed of an obsessive ideology, the Xadow explained, "Cowards had we been. There is only one way to defeat the horrors that lay beyond, that yet lie in wait to assail us, and that is by embodying the very things we feared: terror, chaos, and war. These will give us the strength to not only survive but triumph over our adversaries. And so will we strengthen the galaxy." What they could not comprehend was how such a path would transform them, but their minds were no longer able to see reason.

Lorian reemerged at this time to heal these two races, but to his surprise, he found that he could not. He had diminished. All he could do was warn them that they each represented a different form of imbalance and that perhaps, as a united group, they might keep the other in check. For a time, they actually listened, for they held his wisdom in high regard and were grateful that at least one of their progenitors had survived. Their attempt at conciliation would not last. The damage was too great; their approaches too ideologically opposed; their attitudes too unyielding. And in the midst of the Empyrean Wars, their own opprobrious war broke out. The Xadow were initially defeated, but they simply moved underground to gather strength and allies and prepare to unleash pandemonium in the years ahead. And so it went on and on.

The Xaxax faction of the former Triad had also been affected by the telepathic tampering of the Kindred of Ooradryl. A technologically skilled Precursor race of bioluminescent energy-beings with pelagic forms akin to cnidarians, the Xaxax could take on different shapes and even enter physical organisms, though they did not engage in such behaviors at this time.

Even before the Empyrean Wars, the Xaxax were divided along philosophical lines. Having failed some of their offspring races, a faction split off, believing that their interference had only added to the galactic mayhem. It was this group that had joined the Triad, seeing in the Great Gate an opportunity to escape the fast-spreading conflict. With the spectacular failure of that attempt and the effect of Uthoqquan's mental corruption, they became obsessed with the pursuit of knowledge, believing that it alone would solve the galaxy's woes.

Referred to later as Mindriders and Energy Riders, they made their homes in various nebulae; some for seclusion so as to better meditate on the madness of the galaxy, but others to have a hidden base from which to find targets. Despite the rules they'd established on *dipping*, a process in which they temporarily entered into the mortal coils of sapient beings in order to gather information from their minds, many broke the rules, justifying this on the grounds that by directly tasting their hosts' experi-

ences, they might better understand them and prevent conflict. This invariably led to psychological addiction as they began to inhabit beings for longer and longer periods for no reason other than the thrill of vicariously living through others.

ANGELS & DEMONS

With the Firstborn and their progeny engaged in conflicts across tens of thousands of worlds, colonies of the gas-based lifeform known as the Tirrith were sent out to effect atmospheric changes on a molecular level, salvaging countless planets that would otherwise have been reduced to deserts.

For those whose worlds could not be salvaged, the avian Ahra Naffi, known then as the Wake Angels, and their offspring, the Qonet, developed a network of sanctuary worlds upon which refugees could begin life anew. Also providing respite to those who'd been decimated by invading armies were the Oswaft, who with the assistance of their Aiwha, Thranta, and Neebray offspring, secluded them in far-off and obscure nebulae. Other Elder Races unstintingly took in scores of refugees to safe locations.

Many of the Resolute served as Healers or Messengers of the Way, saving countless lives. Manifest amongst these were the great empaths and plant peoples: the Caamasi and their offspring races; the Asogians and their Ho'Din, Revwien, and Ithorian offspring races, who made medicinals and herbs from the jungles and forests of their worlds.[89] Some, like the Rotians, employed thei innate healing powers, while Dresselians, Carosites, Sunesi, Fareen, and Diagnosans of Coldjen served as medics and physicians.

There were even warriors amongst the Judicious who had healing powers. The Cathar and their felinae and feliformia offspring wielded an internal vibrational therapeutic system as a powerful restorative that could mend bones, and the Farnym could dispense naturally-healing pheromones. In later times, this ability amongst the felinoid races diminished as they bred more for fighting or chose to utilize their restorative prowess only for their own kinds.

And there were false healers too.

On sundry worlds, Ooradryl and his heaving, gnawing kin, unfettered from Illathurion and unbound by terrestrial limits, alighted as gods to offer cures for the body and soul to all who would serve them. In desperation or with darkened hearts poisoned by greed, many did… As "divine" healers, the Kindred restored the vigor of some while draining others of their life-force, claiming they were "too far gone."

Of the many outlandish cults dedicated to Ooradryl, Waru, Uthoqquan, and Nyeegath, the most famous was the Fellowship of Kooroo that stretched from the Outer Rim world of Qalydon to the Core World of Orooturoo. The Shrines of Kooroo on Haffrin, Gelgelar, Branteez, Sufezz, Boztrok, Vaynai, Mindor, and many more

[89] Among the most well-known of these are the Neenapods, colloquially referred to as health fruits, which were widespread before the introduction of kolto and are still cultivated on agriworlds such as Arborea and Nectaroon.

were naught but temples to Ooradryl and his maleficent ilk, providing visions of bliss for their lower worshippers, places for the Kindred to feed, and telepathic receptacles that enabled their highest acolytes to summon the gods from across the galaxy.

But the Kindred remained circumspect, knowing that as they fed upon the herds of quivering flesh, there would come one greater than they who would ravage the stars—not the Architects but a liege of the Ancient Ones to whom they'd secretly made allegiance. And as the servants of the Kindred became contaminated by lust, power, and wealth, bloodshed became the norm. So were these worlds prepared for this coming Prince.

Meanwhile, in the vastly populated Vorsuul system, fierce and heated battles were being fought. On the one side were the Selonians, Drall, Felin, Orthar-riding Kumumgah Crusaders, Conjeni, and Balti. On the other were Borhek-riding Arakhyn, Schizodes, and Slughs.

To the leaders of these armies, Nyeegath came to offer victory and domination.

With a large defense force at his back, Selonian leader Nala Püak stood tall before the gleaming giant cube that hovered before him: "We have heard of you from those erstwhile allies who accepted your *blessings*. We have seen firsthand how the promises you make come at a terrible price—how corruption and depravity follow like shadows in your wake. We reject you and your *gifts* and will not bow to the immoral and execrable gods of Illathurion."

Nyeegath's laugh was obloquious. "What is war but not the king of corruption and queen of depravity? Whether in the living flesh or as a decaying corpse, you will bow!" Then he floated over to the leader of the opposition, to whom he offered to eliminate Püak's forces and raise the Arakhyn into fabulous kings.

But the Arakhyn leader, Exal Paeyn, replied: "You would see us disgraced, unworthy of defeating our enemies in fair combat, hiding behind the skirts of those they view as obscenities! *Never* would we do this! We will win and live or we will lose and die, but we will do so by our own cunning, strength, and honor!"

Nyeegath, cackling, said before he flew off, "I will remember all your cunning, strength, and honor when I am sucking your innards dry!" He knew that such ones were the exceptions to the rule. They would be made an example of. So the Kindred went forth in a train of horrors calling to the Place of the Fire-Madness, and from the green flames that ever burned within, the one called the Prince of the Stars vowed to devour those who had denied them.

In dread of these false gods and those who unswervingly killed for them, several planets turned to the aid of the Diathim on Iego. The Firstborn Diathim were called Angels for their incomparable beauty and resemblance to the Celestials, though few outside of the Elder Races knew the truth. As with the Fāta, they were not a Firstborn race but Valdilar who had volunteered to aid the Conclave of the Firstborn and taken quasi-incarnate forms. They were amongst the most conspicuous of those who roamed the stars as healers and guides, and few there were that they could not restore to health or provide comfort to. When they arrived, the enemy—no matter how foul

or powerful—would flee before them in terror. The Diathim could even heal those whose souls had been forcibly taken over by the ruinous powers.

The three greatest of the Diathim were Amoth Eldin, Erb, and Arklan-chost, and they now came before the rulers of the fighting factions only to be defied.

"We declare independence from Star Deities," Nala Püak proclaimed.

"We proclaim liberation from Universal Powers," Exal Paeyn declared.

Bypassing those who refused to listen to reason, Amoth Eldin turned to the Arakhyn and Selonian forces in the Vorsuul system, urging them to cease hostilities and find a peaceful resolution: "If you do not resolve this matter, bloodguilt will lay upon you, and you will open yourselves to the influence of those abhorrent *others* who are coming to claim you for their own." Some laid down their arms on both sides, and to these Erb said, "Flee this system before it is too late." But not all paid heed. Despite the danger posed to their world and peoples, a deep hatred lay heavy on their hearts for their opponents. To these Arklan-chost now added, "Ships shall we send before the end. Seek escape upon them or be doomed."

Not all of the Diathim were pleased by this development. Blehcamp had long felt disdain for what he perceived as the forbearance and laxity of his elder siblings, and he was not alone; Vabo, Sciviosama, Acklerc, and Corbemtripe knew what was coming upon the Vorsuul system, and vexed as they were by the stubborn refusal of their kind to lay down the law for the best interests of everyone, they reasoned that the best course of action might be for them to cleanse the galaxy of the plagues infecting it. This course had not been permitted the Validar by the Ancient Decree, but arrogant indignation had taken hold of them. *We will do far better than those who came before. Our superior intellect and hard actions will save the galaxy!*

They would start with the destruction of the Kindred and their growing cult.

"Destroy us, you may," Ooradryl reasoned, his gleaming cube spinning hypnotically as it hovered before the Diathim who looked upon his altar in the Temple of Ooryl, "but do you not first wish to understand *why* these foolish mortals are so swayed by lies but repulsed by truths? For we have learned much in our time…" The Diathim, believing there was no harm that could come of hearing them out and curious to know what wisdom they'd gleaned, listened intently to the desolate songs of the Kindred.

The song that Ooradryl sang that fateful day was of disillusionment and despair… of foolish desires and hidden pleasures… of unhindered chaos and spiraling anguish… of surrender… Soon enough, the Diathim joined their voices to the mesmeric music that swept their hearts in strains of brooding and lonely vistas… Uthoqquan's counterpoint melody, subtly woven, sung of the hidden insight that belonged only to the gods; Nyeegath harmonized with echoes of lost order and towering onyx spires of purity and dominion; Waru's background rhythm underscored the prurience of the fallen flesh, its secret alluring sins that led to calamity. The melody of the Diathim changed the dynamics and tempo, for it was of brooding resentment and frustration… and so they forgot the Ancient Decree and went forth with a new purpose.

Over the course of the next several years, Blehcamp, Vabo, Sciviosama, Acklerc, and Corbemtripe worked to turn many of their kind, implicating the failures of the

leaders in the Conclave of the Firstborn, fixating on the horrors yet pouring forth into the galaxy, and musing on the great good they might yet accomplish if they only would assert their great will upon the Enemy. Cerebriport was the first to pay heed.

After he helped bring in sufficient numbers to their cause, they met on an uninhabited world and made a pact: "Skyriver is ours to govern—it has been allotted us!" announced Blehcamp. "Yet, we have sat by and watched as opposing forces vie for dominance over *our* realms! No longer! Prophecy speaks of a *future* time, a great Restoration and Anabasis and of Chosen Ones who will restore balance! How long will it take before we realize that *we* are the Chosen Ones meant to bring this about? Most of the Firstborn Council have opted to fight. So shall we! Where they have failed, we shall succeed, for greater wisdom and power belong to us—and who of the Old Ones can stand before it? Which of their spawn can match what we can produce? Who of the Outer Gods has power to equal us? Once we are victorious, we will be heralded… and unlike our sleeping brethren, we will not tolerate self-governance, as that but creates vacuums of power that others e'er compete to fill. The apprehensive Diathim will undoubtedly denounce our methods and means, but it is we who must denounce their feebleness and failures, and so they will seek to stop us, but what good will such efforts be if they are opposed by the galaxy itself? What we require, then, is the establishment of a dynastic bloodline, for not even the Diathim would dare interfere with the free will of the peoples. Henceforth, Diathim we are no longer… but something greater! For now, we will work in the shadows to achieve what our siblings will not. So shall we be known as the *Maelibi!*"[90]

Upon the worlds in which they'd been providing aid, the Maelibi used their mellifluous voices to sing songs of the divine right of kings and the glory that would fall upon its peoples, inspiring each populace to bring forth mates into whom their seed would be placed. These offspring would be trained to rule as demigod-kings. It would begin on Equanus, Voorlach, Morda, Krayiss II, Priplanus, Ebra, and others.

The spawn of their unions were no numinous beings of great wisdom and godlike mien, however, but a diver's host of hostile hybrids. So came the reptillian, red-skinned Thalassians; the three-headed Cerberus; the deadly, wormlike Zoa'mon; the six-armed, six-legged Exodeenians; and a tall and aggressive cyclopean race; others included Iktotchi, Devaronians, and Chironians, all three of whom refused to go along with the Maelibi plot. But for the Maelibi, these were but setbacks.

In the meantime, on Maelibo, they began raising creatures who they would unleash against their opponents, mammoth monstrosities that had no known names but wielded great power; these included the vicious Chimaera along with gigantic versions of Forest Beasts, Dianogas, Maritima, Divto, Sandworms, and Sarlaccs.

Events moved more precipitously than they'd hoped. Word reached the ears of the Diathim of never-before-seen aliens and worlds serving strange new gods. *What new horrors have emerged?* wondered the Diathim as they flew off to inspect.

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[90] Maelibi translates to the "princes of the place," "ancestral princes," and, curiously, "questioning the measure." But there exists an even older derivation that means "Princes of Wickedness."

When they discovered that it was their own siblings that had done this, they nearly lost heart, unable to fathom it: "How can those who know better have committed so great an evil?" Regrouping, they appeared before the Conclave of the Firstborn in the Koornacht Cluster, where they regularly assembled, to warn them.

It was a trap. The Council was now taken over by the Maelibi. Several of its more incalcitrant members had been beheaded; their partially-skinned skulls now sat atop the chamber's candelabras in warning to those who might think to oppose them. The Maelibi had hoped to keep their plot secret until their offspring races had matured further, but the prying Diathim had spoiled that. Realizing that it would have eventually come to this anyway, they declared themselves the Supreme Authority in Skyriver and threatened to kill the remaining council members if the Diathim did not submit. The Diathim pleaded with them to return to the path of light, but this elicited naught but scorn. The Maelibi knew they had the upper hand. "You well know that a war on two fronts will see the Enemy triumph. Submit and we will bring them to heel, and once more will the galaxy know peace!"

"You will have merely supplanted one adversary for another," Amoth Eldin said, but seeing as incalculable loss would result if they did not submit, the Diathim acquiesced. And then horror struck!

Maelibi wings were severed from their bodies as if torn by large invisible shears; their flesh came to be overlaid with a liquescent gold, leaving a metallic exoskeleton; their screams reached to the heights as even their very names were stripped of them.

The Maelibi had overplayed their hand. Having broken the Ancient Decree, including the prohibition against unsanctioned commerce with mortals, a force descended upon them against which they could not prevail.

Powerless to even flee, the Maelibi were driven in chains through a portal opened by the Diathim to an underworld abyss deep beneath Maelibo, upon what is known today as Iego. Confined within the overlapping Hell-realm of Duodel, one of the Charnel Worlds, demarcated by the bones of the monstrous dead, and there they yet remain, singing their melancholy songs for the far-off day when they will be set free.

The hearts of the innocent Diathim were broken that day, but their resolve was strong; they would yet see to the task they'd been given. The wicked offspring of the Maelibi were exiled to worlds of their own… and no gates were afforded them from which to depart. Yet, they were not sent to suffer and die, for there was hope they might reform. Byss was given to the cyclopean race who were ever after called the Abyssin; the Cerberus were sent to Nyny; the Thalassians to Thalassa (later Thela); the Devaronians to Devaron. As to the centauriform Chironian and Iktotchi, the Kwa would much later help them develop their latent Force abilities.

That first generation of hostile Maelibi offspring did not reform, retaining the divine spark of their fathers along with an inclination towards domination and a proclivity for violence. As they could fight no others they fought themselves. One battle followed another, but as they had Diathim blood, those that perished did not quite die but came back as evil spirits and haunters of the dark, and they are now known as Dark Side Wraiths.

THE SWAMP DEMON OF SOMOV RIT

Though exceedingly rare, not all of the Maelibi had chosen to go through with their plans. Although stripped of immortality and most of his powers, Wrynok was exiled to Somov Rit where he was given the form of a Sephi male and left with long life and a warning from the Diathim who released him: "You will not be lonely, for people will arrive on your shores, and you must remain benevolent and wise. But know this: if ever your true nature and name is discovered, you will become subject to that one, for just as you sought to dominate, so will you be dominated."

It would not be long after that the first Human colonists came to settle Somov Rit, bruised and battered from their failed struggle against Huhk pillagers who had mysteriously escaped the Forbidden City on Lahsbane and coursed through a portal to their city on Cataalda. Wrynok introduced himself as King Anthon Chijen and provided them food, medicinal herbs, and homes in small but cozy hamlets he'd earlier constructed. From there they would spread out, and for many years the people were safe and content. King Chijen, however, was not content, for despite a handsome countenance and noble air, he knew he was unlike all others and alone in all the worlds. Finally, accepting that he was indeed no longer Diathim nor Maelibi but a mere mortal, he consented to take the beautiful and beloved Krewin Ten-Risck as his wife and queen.

As the love of Krewin and Anthon ripened and matured, so too did they shower their subjects in compassion and justice. Only one thing stood in the way of complete happiness: their inability to produce a child and heir. So it was that Queen Ten-Risck took up a disguise and traveled into the Great Bog to seek out Dona D'aigua the Bruixera, who was regarded as a Wise Woman.

At last, the Bruixera thought, grinning gleefully. *Long have I waited for this moment*. She knew a happy people cannot easily be misled, not even by the descendent of a Witch-Queen. So it was that Dona D'aigua saw through the queen's disguise, but keeping her scorn in check, she feigned sympathy as "Krewin" told her sad tale of barrenness. Then explaining to her royal emptor,"Don't cry, my dear. Just a simple elixer will allow you to produce children, which I happen to have. Come, lay here on my divan. It will take but a moment for me to fetch it." Instead, the Bruixera produced a geas of *somnifer interminabilis*. The moment the queen passed into slumber, the witch raised a blade kept hidden in the folds of her dress, ready to slay her even as she slept. But deciding upon a better plan, she wove instead a glamor. Transforming herself into the queen, the spell simultaneously turned the sleeping queen into her!

If her journey to the castle was frought with unease, it would soon pass as she came to confirm that none could pierce her disguise. The only thing that threatened to expose her was her own nature, which so differed from the true queen's famously magnanimous bearing that she was forced to go to great lengths to hide her moody, grasping, manipulative disposition. But for the king, she would need more. So she explained that she was deeply saddened by her inability to produce children and needed some distance to grieve. For his part, King Chijen was wholly solicitous and attentive to her desires, going to great pains to overlook any and all failings, for greatly did he love his wife and did not expect her to always be perfect.

To stave off senescence and maintain her vitality, Dona D'aigua had to regularly perform the bathing ritual of which is required the blood of maidens and children. In her true form, this was near impossible without exposing herself, a foolish risk that

had brought down several of her sisters and elders. But as the queen, she would never be suspected and could afford to indulge her vanity for a change.

With the disappearance of children and young maids, the villages wailed and withered in grief. The king vowed to find the villain responsible and spent long days away with his gendarmerie seeking answers that he'd never find, for she was both clever and careful. Ever the king departed hopeful and ever he returned defeated. But frustrated though he was, never did she see him lag, waver, or suffer exhaustion, and she began to suspect he was not what he appeared to be either. She burned with curiosity to know his true nature, and this became an obsession.

The weeks passed with her getting no closer to discovering his secret, not even with the use of her usually potent charms. As the abductions seemed to have stopped, she convinced the king to take a holiday so that he might see things with fresh eyes.

She led their carriage to a cottage the Bruixera had raised by Lake Tulcea several kilometers distant, which none of their servants or subjects knew of, having killed the builders after they'd completed its construction. With the aid of several charms and copious wine from the nearby vineyards, she at last plied from the king his story. Then, at the moment he uttered his true name, Wrynok, he grew weak and resumed his prior shape as one of the Maelibi!

The witch was stunned! Here was no mere Malagarrian wizard or Sephi caster but something out of the ancient world. And *she* had trapped *him!* Laughing in triumph, Dona D'aigua dragged him to a hidden room designed especially for her victims. There she revealed who she truly was and all of the vile acts she'd committed that had confounded him. "Where is my wife?" the horrified king asked.

"Ha! Never you mind, demon!" Though he'd never wronged her, now that she had power over him, she couldn't help but mistreat him, kicking him whenever he approached too close to the cage bars, deriding him, carping on over petty grievances and her estimation that he'd ruled too long. He could endure much, but when she threatened to have the queen destroyed to ensure that she remained on the throne, he nearly fell to madness. He didn't know that the spell required that the victim remain alive in order for the caster to maintain her form, and she didn't tell him.

The next time she visited, he again pleaded for his wife, but she refused. "It won't matter since you will be long dead," she told him, enjoying his suffering, "unless you put aside your stubbornness and grant me the powers of the Maelibi!"

"But I have already told you: even if I wished it, there is no power left in me to grant you this, for I am longer of their kind, cursed as I am to live as mortals do."

"And yet, here you stand before me, a golden Demon! Persist in your selfishness, and I will bring you the queen's head for company." Then she laughed and departed for the castle where she pretended to mourn her missing husband.

It was near upon a week when Dona D'aigua returned to gloat, for she was vain and had no one with whom to share her wicked victories. "I told our good subjects that the Bruixera of the Great Bog was the very fiend who'd abducted their king and killed the women and children. They are even now on their way to my old hut to exact vengeance!" In this, she told the truth, though she could not know what next would occur.

Weeping inconsolably, Anthon reached his arms out through the bars of the cage in supplication. Scorning his pathetic demeanor, she kicked him again. It would be the last time she did. Quick as a flash, he grabbed her leg and pulled her down. She shrieked, but before she could utter a single word or malediction, he'd drawn her neck

nearer to him and squeezed the life from her. Long had he let her believe him weaker than he actually was, for he'd realized early on that there was no mercy in her. With alacrity, he took from her person the keys to his jail, unlocked the cage, and departed for the witch's hut in the swamps.

No one was there. He was too late. On the chance that the witch had lied, he stole to the castle to see if the queen might yet be alive and well. But while overhearing the talk of some of villagers, it became clear that they were mourning the loss of both of their rulers. So did the king grow despondent and withdrawn. Believing himself cursed for his foolishness and past deeds, he determined to no longer traffic in the world of Men. Bitterly did he mourn his fate and, henceforth, kept to the Great Bog, ever searching for the body of his wife, which most assuredly had been tossed in.

Several of his faithful subjects and servants would periodically come searching for him, only to encounter a terrible creature, a Banyoles, they thought, or some mad Demon who warned them to never again speak the names of King Chijen or Queen Ten-Risck. And there Wrynok remained, deeming himself forgotten as all mortals are with the passage of enough suns. A superstition grew around the Great Bog that said that any who passed and spoke aloud their names would be devoured by the Swamp Demon of Somov Rit. When several partially eaten bodies turned up in and around the marshes, victims of a Vibria Dragon that had come down from the north, legend became law, and it was prohibited to speak one's name while outdoors. Long millennia after the law was repealed, the citizens still only use nicknames in public, and the myth yet persists that a Demon roams the swamps of Somov Rit.

In his anxiety and grief, Wrynok had failed to consider another possibility. When the gendarmerie came to the Wise Woman's hut to inquire upon the rumor they heard of her misdeeds, they'd espied *not* the form of Dona D'aigua but that of the queen, who at the death of the Bruixera had reverted back to her original form. As she lay unconscious, they brought her to the menders of the castle, but they were unable to awaken her or understand what had put her in a comatose state.

Not long after, a young brother and sister went out upon the great plain of Torphet that runs up by the Pyresian Mountains, where in the distant future the city of Marinmar would stand. They came upon Lake Tulcea and the empty cottage, and upon exploring it, came upon the rigored body of Dona D'aigua and ran off to report it.

Puzzled by the mystery but wise enough to detect that something foul was afoot, the court sent the gendarmerie back to the witch's hut in the swamp. Peering inside of it, a dark shape passed by. Though frightened, they nevertheless gathered the spellbooks and potions and returned to the castle where the menders found the appropriate runes necessary to remove the enchantment of sleep that lay upon the queen. Upon hearing of all that had transpired, the revived queen led an expedition to find this "Demon," for she knew in her heart that her husband yet lived.

The sound of his wife's voice and sight of her still-beautiful face took Wrynok aback, and he thought to hide, convinced that his monstrous shape would repulse her. But she caught him before he could decamp and called out, assuring him that she loved him no matter what he looked like. To demonstrate that, she strode over and kissed him full on the lips.

And at that moment, he resumed his previous form as the noble King Anthon Chijen. So it was that the pair lived a long and happy life, having many faithful sons and daughters, and ruling wisely and well until their passing.

CHAPTER FORTY

EMPIRES OF ETERNAL VOID

Multiform and monstrous were the unseen horrors of this age, of things that crept up from stone, root, and flesh. These saturnine years were known as the Grieving, and many were the races that came to bitterly regret their surrender to the stratagem of the Architects. Now that the consequences of their choices were being felt, their connection to the Celestials was all the more missed, for these beings had not only been protectors but sustainers and keys to the life-force of the galactic inhabitants. For despite what victories had been won in the Empyrean Wars, the corollary was a deluge of destruction that now suffused the once-bright worlds in an orgiastic and abhorrent expulsion of betrayal and blood. And in the suffering surge, aging and death spread like a wildfire that nothing could curtail or put out.

The living energy-field of the galaxy cried out in pain, "Death in its caravan of carnage has come to our fields, seawaters, and skies with agony and grief at his heels. Thus does the balance of life teeter on the edge of the void, threatening to claim us all, for the residuum of craven volition exacts a heavy toll."

And war, that rottenest of fruit, and its companion, progress, had driven many to delirium, including those ancient Elementals who reside in the hearts of the planets and moons, now polluted and plundered, that could not but respond to the galaxy's plunge into chaos with chaos. With these driven to imbalance, the delicate interconnection of life had begun to break down, and as another must needs take its place, born in strife, a predator-prey paradigm arose alongside illness through the onset of germs, viruses, parasites, and pathogens, causing even greater loss of life than the teeth, claws, and weapons of the Enemy. Food and resources also became scarce, and as the nations sought to rule themselves in place of their forsaken guides, the overall quality of life diminished.

The Precursors employed their gifts to grow, share, and distribute food, as well as cure the many pestilences that had begun to multiply and transmit. But the Healers were few, and the cosmos was large. And what none could heal was the shattered connections between and within worlds; nor were things so simply split between enemy and allied nations, as several adversarial races came over to the other side, whereas many were divided against their allies and even themselves.

Few had come back from the wars, and of those that did, many were damaged. Blame was cast, mainly on the elders, and societies were hastily remade into new frameworks, allowing ambitious and angry ones to take positions of authority. The cultural fabric, unique to each race but designed on the principles of harmony and compassion, was fragmented as schisms, fear, and hostilities took their place, altering the cultural dynamic so that the notion of peace proved elusive and illusory. This period was called the Darkening.

Agricultural worlds had become necessary after the damage done by the Nytocris, but as governments became fanatically devoted to manufacture and technology, this necessity trebled. And as new methods were brought about to replace the old, barristers, solicitors, credit-lenders, administrators, and judicials came into being, as did merchants, agents, clerks, and brokers, and with them were expounded an assortment of economies and political systems. The former were based on a variety of valuable resources, including fuel and precious metals, and as planets became part of larger communities struggling to unite under various banners, these would come to settle on intergalactic credit currencies, which were soon exploited by the various rulers, governors, magnates, and coalitions that took advantage of their positions and the trust placed in them to do what was best for the people they claimed to serve.[91]

The era of the politician, corporation, and criminal enterprise had arrived, with the three often indistinguishable from the other. Splendorous emperies that once spanned the firmament in bonds of friendship were replaced by capricious bureaucracies, debased warlords, and avaricious governments that deemed the lands, seas, and stars theirs to be dominated or destroyed as they saw fit. Of the cultural norms that proliferated under them, many were based on the Human model or were developed in accord with the diabolic templates disseminated by the Shadow Council, which turned out to be much the same thing.

Though the Firstborn attempted to legislate matters of law and justice, many of the younger races declared independence from them—and this was granted, for the Elder Races did not wish to have cause for conflict with them. Nevertheless, they formed a galaxy-wide Tribunal of Justice (or Intergalactic Tribunal) which oversaw numerous Interplanetary Tribunals which sent out patrols and bounty hunters to capture and arrest any who violated basic galactic law.

They also established prison worlds on Dolfirm, Desevro, Destructon, Narkad, Sorbo, Atata, Zetakron Alpha, Theselena, Entra, Fiorina 161, Mekkar VII, and Terran Raa, though these were quite different than what they later became, dedicated to rehabilitation not punishment or mere incarceration, though the latter method was utilized for powerful, deranged, and chronic offenders. And for the most dangerous of these, the Firstborn created small pocket dimensions of Inner Space where they could do no harm. Not everyone adopted these models, and various unaffiliated sectors set aside their own locations for confinement and methods of punishment.

A variety of multi-species law enforcement agencies emerged across the galaxy, and though some existed only to serve the ruling class, most were focused on maintaining peace, equity, and evenhanded justice. The millennia saw the emergence of the Galactic Peacekeepers, Lawkeepers, Police Control, Sidereal Shock Troopers, Planet Police, Space Police, Peaceguardians, Patrolians, Invincibles, Galaxy Rangers, Marshalls, Ethercorps, the Bureau of Intergalactic Law Enforcement, the Infinity Guard, Star Sheriffs, the Legion of Space, and the Interstellar Patrol.

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[91] Valuable fuel sources were anthracite, coaxium, deutronium/deuterium, and tylium, and other forms of star fuel emerged. Paper money—introduced by Notron—was still employed in this early period. Currency in some places used zuleks, pazoors, and chronos, all of which were later called credits.

PEOPLE OF THE LIE

More treacherous than all the armies and enchantments of the Enemy were the murrain and sorcerous ideologies that had begun to proliferate at this time, craftily designed as pragmatic political, economic, and cultural systems that were not on the surface evil, but which propped up exploitative ideologies and hierarchical hegemonies. Though the Serpent People had seen success in spreading these amongst the races that had earlier revolted against the Celestials, the Shadow Council were shrewder in the affairs of commerce, government, religion, science, recreation, and law—the six intergalactic institutions that became the paradigm of the Domination System. These principles were codified and taught by means of operatives who'd infiltrated respected positions of authority, governments, communications, armed forces, and centers of learning throughout the galaxy, and came to be in a prime position to perpetuate, defend, and sell these ideologies in whatever iterations they morphed into, for they all shared the same goals of replacing the verities of the Celestials with a countervailing narrative that emotionalised and mythologized authoritarianism, exploitation, materialism, militarism, and notions of superiority: of the *strong*, of some groups over others, of the ruling class over the ruled masses, with the legitimization of violence as the means of domination and redemption.

With the high culture of the Firstborn rejected as impractical, and each world attempting to find a new moral code for themselves, these insidious philosophies and systems disseminated and became embedded by means of the new hierarchies. Some came to be perpetuated in relative innocence by those who'd been taught them from youth as a matter of course, with the masses never thinking to question what society considered incontrovertible truths. That the Domination System was fractured and changed into different and even competing ideologies—achieved gradually or spontaneously by educators and elites—was itself no impediment to their fundamentally pernicious nature. In fact, such an evolution was anticipated. Nonetheless, a direct hand remained ever present in political and cultural spheres even down to the formation of the Galactic Republic.[92]

So it was that many of the creation myths in the galaxy came about from the influence of the Shadow Council, tailor-made by the various races for a people who had disdained and later forgotten the stories told them long before by their parent races, replacing them with tales that did not pivot on their moral failings.

By and large, the deleterious effects of these new mores were not immediately perceived, but there were exceptions. On Cadma, the Cadmians had become divided over what food sources were permissible. The Northern tribes said it was barbaric to eat the Molossus, who were noble and sacred creatures. The Southern tribes said it was cruel to eat the Pilax, who were their companion animals. After years of conflict, unable to come to an agreement, they approached the far Western nation of the Orranananans, a crustacean-like race who had come from Illathurion but had shown no

[92] Wearing the Mantle of Babulon—an artifact that projected authority and respect upon its wearer—the Four Sages of Dwartii became instrumental in crafting the Galactic Constitution. But no mere lawmakers were these, but secret agents of the Shadow Council.

aggressiveness towards them. It was agreed to abide by the judgement of the Orrananan monarch, King Kreeft. After patiently listening to both sides without interruption, asking pertinent questions, and taking some time to pronounce his ruling, he returned to stand before them and said, "You are both right… and you are both wrong. Indeed, it is cruel and barbaric to kill and eat what is noble and companionable—and since your peoples have shown yourselves to be neither, *you will all serve as food for us!*" And so the problem was solved as the Orrananans caged and bred the two tribes, united at last. This continued until the time of Xim the Despot, who found the Orrananan practice detestable and wiped them out.[93]

An even more direct bridge to the Enemy could be found in the mystery cults and mystic arts of the Left-Hand Path, which was made appealing to the young and embittered, for in the fields of religion and recreation, the Ninûsgidzida more liberally sprinkled their metaphysics and licentious practices as rebellious celebrations of lust, power, and violence—not merely as a necessary evil for defending and expanding empire—but as a pleasurable endeavor in and of itself.

Yet, sometimes they pushed too far, and the people pushed back. Such was the case with the Kashi Mer. With the Seth civilization all but eradicated, the Kashi Mer Dynasty expanded their sphere of influence. They would have soon filled all of the important government positions on Pax had not two of their youngest sons, Brock and Aleck, become careless in their depravities, leading to the gruesome deaths of several young men and women from prominent families. Had they restricted their vicious acts to the poor, it would have been brushed under the rug—as it had been for years—but the murder of wealthy youths was another matter. The scandal erupted in an unfolding story that revealed such wanton depravity that no amount of money could make go it away. Nor did the family's attempts to foist blame on their political opponents work and their lurid claims were ridiculed and dismissed.

The leaked footage of Brock and Aleck's nocturnal affairs, recorded on their personal holovids, of blood rites and other shocking acts, captivated the Paxians, and as more evidence emerged, so did revelations of more widespread perversions practiced by the adult members. Although declared innocent in the trials, it was well known that the judges had been bribed, a common enough practice, but one that this time led to the family name losing prestige amongst their fellow elites. This caused the executives, administrators, managers, and directors of Kashi Mer properties and assets to depart Pax entirely—to the cheers of the citizens who would have preferred to see them hanged. In the Phelleem System, on an unnamed planet which they called Kashi, they re-established their businesses far from prying eyes. Other branches of the family, unwilling to be stained by the Kashi name, broke off all ties with them at this time and established holdings on other worlds under different names.

Though bruised, the Kashi Mer Dynasty was far from broken. Years later, unhampered by the moralistic and squeamish concerns of the public, Kashi became a playground for the rich and famous who would visit on annual retreats to strengthen financial ties, institute laws and policies, and enter into alliances. In the exclusive

[93] A hybrid offspring was spared due to their unusual worldview and permitted to depart for the planet Decapod to establish a home of their own.

retreat known as the Grove of the Iconoclast, those enamored by the rumors of cabalistic knowledge went through a series of trials and abominable rites to cement their loyalty to the Vault of the Sea, who continued to wield influence with the wealthy nobles of the Core Worlds. But even the Kashi Mer would, in time, come to look upon themselves as septic and abhorrent and struggle to change their ways.

In this and other instances, it is seen that the light yet shone across the glimmering sea, for despite the baneful reach of the dark, virtue had not entirely been snuffed out, nor could the radiance of truth be wholly engulfed, for they who dwelt in the dark without sense and vision often fought amongst themselves or pushed too hard, reminding the condemned masses why the darkness should be opposed. And ever there was a benevolent hand to guide them.

LOST SOULS IN THE STARS ALONE

With a galaxy under siege by the terrifying forces of the Old Ones, several of the Elder Races went to great lengths to protect themselves. Some of these efforts proved so disastrous it resulted in the loss of an entire people.

The Demmeonites had once been a brilliant race who had come to lament their course of action during the war. They had taken in the Canidans and given them the workings of the hyperdrive, but no amount of charity could free them from the guilt they felt. Haunted by the approach of death in the waning days of their once-glorious race, they opted to transfer their mind-spirits into the mainframe of a continent-spanning computer. But when even this was threatened by an aggressive race of Nytocris, they developed an alternate means of escape—into an existence of pure energy. Unfactored into their equation, however, was the side-effects of this, as they lost all knowledge of who and what they were, so that when the Enemy later came upon their world, they readily seized and appropriated their technology.

When word of this got out, the pterosaur-like Gaoul of Sesharrim made a choice. The "children of the gods," as their name meant, knew they could not allow the dark forces to steal their formidable technology (as others once stole their name), and put it to evil ends. So the Gaoul destroyed it. But this action, while prudent in the eyes of the Resolute, drew the ire of the Judicious and made the Gaoul pariahs amongst them.

The Tchuukthai Precursors took an altogether different approach, altering their genetic makeup so that their offspring could better escape detection. The "Shaggy Ones," as they were called by some, hid their homeworld, while those dwelling on other worlds pretended to be wild beasts called Wharls or Ortogs. Scrupulous in shunning association and proximity to less peaceful peoples, they were aided in this by an innate ability that allowed them to sense hostile intent from a distance. Of the Tchuukthai offspring races, three came to prominence at this time:

> When Humans arrived on Corsin, they began hunting the Selligore. They also tried to eradicate the felinoid Cor "vermin." But with the aid of the native Tinn'lyi, they turned on their oppressors and drove them from the region. But as Humans kept coming, they relocated the Cor to Gargolyn. However, a colony of Maldont had claimed that world. Their massive king terrorized the Cor until he was turned to the light by a wise Cor shaman. So the Maldont of Gargolyn began to be known as Gargoyles.

Agile and strong, few of the Covallon of Cov were caught, but those that were doffed their clothing and went on all fours, allowing the Enemy to perceive them as fierce, non-sapient beasts. "Domesticated" as pets and granted a favored status, particularly amongst the noble classes, captured Covallon served as spies for the Allied Races, and so well did they perform their roles that few were ever suspected.

The modus operandi of the thick-hided, elephantine Eklaad was to find hidden settlements on Eklaa upon which to live peaceably, a tactic that worked well enough for their Morodin siblings until Humans and Krish showed up. Similarly, Eklaa was invaded by a large Serp colony and renamed Sirpar. The name would stay, but the wicked invaders—who began preying on the native fauna that the Eklaad protected—would not. The Eklaad hated violence but were fierce when forced to employ it, driving out the reptilian predators in open battle.

Peace was also the goal of the bovine Ka'aa. With ox horns, a crustacean-like body that looked as if made of branches, and crow-like wings that seemed woven of sturdy cords, the Ka'aa were a deeply spiritual people and members of the Resolute who rejected rancor and cynicism. After seeing their offspring races begin to fall to darkness, the Ka'aa turned nomadic, and though a few later settled Kaa in the Colonies, many traveled to the worlds of their offspring and allies to provide relief and remind them of the promise of the Celestials. And in this they were not unsuccessful, with the Kabieroun, Kadrillians, and others encouraged by their succor and wisdom.

The Siniteen of Mileva turned their backs on the galaxy altogether, refusing to help offspring, allies, or anyone seeking shelter. The Columi were first seen around this time, as were the Mutants of Metaluna (later known as Metellos 3), both of whom had been shaped from parts of Siniteen and Sicmoo by Cold Danda Sine.

The Columi and Metell (the name of the Metalunan Mutants) could not have been more different. Before becoming slaves themselves, the Metell recruited Humans from Pax and augmented them into near-Human Metalunans so that they might join with the many races that made up the Llanna of Utrost in their struggle against the Guarra (the name they gave the enemy races of Illathurion).

The Columi, on the other hand, had no interest in the affairs of "lesser races" and came to Mileva to rule. But after enough years, the Siniteen could no longer tolerate their presence and banished them from Mileva. The Columi then settled one of the worlds in the Colu system, thinking to now govern the Sicmoo instead. But it didn't take many years for the Sicmoo to also grow irritated with the boorish race and drive them out. So the Columi settled a planet in the Core Worlds, which they named Columus, and when Thargorograht asked for allegiance in exchange for revenge, they accepted.

Of the younger races who staunchly pursued individualistic paths, the Swirlies changed their name to Skakoans after secretly pledging their service to the Lord Being, who was one of the Ancient Ones, and belligerently declared themselves neutral. The Cannolites rebuilt their cities behind three-dimensional mathematical locks that only they could open. The Rakririans, disdainful of all sides in the war, kept to their homeworld in the Outer Rim. The Plutonians hid themselves on Merj, becoming insular until they came under the protection of the Drackmarians and became known as Morseeri-

ans. The Pnume of Tschai, in the Carina system, went underground and became collectors of history, neither receiving nor resisting intruders, of which there were several, and those trapped in the crystal lattice of their Foreverness citadel were made slaves.

THE SHARU

In the halcyon age before the Empyrean Wars, the Elder Races often used the Osan Stones that had been gifted them to gaze upon and communicate with their siblings and offspring across the stars. With the advent of war, the Firstborn Council had decreed their destruction, for they said it would be disastrous for the Enemy to get ahold of them, but others argued that the Night Spirit already possessed one that she used in her Great Black Nest to coordinate attacks on Skyriver. Nevertheless, the Council enforced the decree, and this proved unpopular amongst their offspring races.

Osan Stones that survived into later years were priceless, and a few were even augmented by sorcerers and wild magic. Today, they are known as the Oracle Stones. Amongst the adversaries who came into possession of them were Bishop Mandible, Mother Talzin, Jadru, Sidious, Lumiya, and Blackhole. In secret, the Sharu had kept their own, and from it learned of the fall of the Sephi, Jostran, Sobekk, Eruthros, and others, but they never reported any of these activities to the Council, for then it might be known that they'd disobeyed the decree. Yet, upon discovering a passage to Illathurion, they reasoned that their indiscretion might be overlooked if they could bring this knowledge to the Council. So they continued to peer into the stone.

The hidden fortress of the Architects proved fascinating, and they marveled at the bizarre magnitude of the Black Nest, the spatial grandeur of the Great Web, the crepuscular beauty of Shumath-Ghun, and the weird eccentricities of Z'lykarior. Then, in horror, they spied the nine black worlds of the starless Abyss and the invidious, opaque minds that reigned upon them, for one of them noticed and gazed back!

In terror, the Sharu destroyed their Osan Stone, but the damage had been done. Fear gripped them. When a Human ship landed on Trammis III, they abandoned their home and all of their many worlds and offspring races, and fled for an otherwise unknown planet. The Sharu knew the Humans were only refugees, but they also knew that their arrival on Trammis III was no mere accident.

Later, when the Rafa came to annihilate them, they found the Sharu's mighty plastic pyramids that mimicked the Sith's archetypal architecture, but as they could not penetrate these, the Rafa merely held the system for a time. Their leader, Anubis of the Celegit clan, even stole their Cosmonium, but not knowing its significance, inhaled it and departed for the Human world of Asher III with other Rafa who had gone rogue.[94]

So obsessed were the Sharu with hiding themselves from enemies and allies alike that they obfuscated their forms into the near-Human Toka, reinvented their history, and stored their intelligence into a device known as the Mindharp, all so that they might remain safe until the war passed. But the Sharu knew their actions were

[94] He would fall in battle against these Humans, and from his cleaved skull the corrupted Cosmonium appeared as a cobolt bloom that led its entranced partakers to dark magic and darker myths.

craven. They were a Firstborn race created by the same five-limbed Celestial that had fashioned the fearless Mu-Abin. Thus, they fell into a state of guilt and ennui.[276]

The desertion of their offspring on Trammis III had grave consequences. The great supercontinent had three major biomes of desert, jungle, and floodplain upon which a variety of Pherox and Xinli roamed. With their parent race gone, a shadow crept into their hearts as they waited for the Sharu to return. At last, the stronger and fiercer of these declared that they would rule in the absence of the Sharu, but the strict domination of these defied the laws of kindness and reason. When next the Basiliskans arrived, intent on converting the Pherox to their cause and taking the non-sapient Xinli for their war, some went willingly, but most refused. The Pherox spilled enough Basiliskan blood to force them to depart for a time, causing enmity between the two races that would last ages. But the Enemy had done its job. Not only had the Basiliskans converted those later known as the Broncosaurs to their cause, they'd also inaugurated conflict between the Pherox races, for some now adopted the ways of the Basiliskans and learned to enjoy the flesh of the Xinli, which drove them feral, and the smaller of the Pherox now had to live in fear. Thankfully, there were yet large benevolent races to help protect them and maintain the balance of power.[95]

Following the trouble that came to Trammis III, many fled to find their parent race or a new world for themselves now that theirs was no longer in balance, for the gates still stood. Accordingly, numerous Pherox and Xinli wound up on various worlds where they came to be referred to by the Human loanwords dinosaur and megasaur. Some were utilized by enemy and allied forces during the wars, tasked to serve as Guardians to safeguard gates, communities, and commodities. Their descendents yet roam these worlds, but they have no knowledge of Trammis III or the Sharu.

In the great coniferous forests and volcanic lava fields of Trammis III, they have since been grouped into various species. Of the large and deadly theropods are the infamous Sharptooths known in various cultures as Tavarian Dragons and Garwors (Tyrannosaurs in modern designations); the Akorec (Spinosaurs); and the Ubese Thorn-Back War Dragons (Ceratosaurs). Of the peaceable races, there are the Longnecks (Sauropods) and Spiketails (Stegosaurs). Some of the flying races could traverse the stars and made new homes for themselves in faraway systems.[96]

Of the Xinli, there are many similar in appearance to the Pherox: the Neek, Pikobi, and Trigha Theropods; Makloc, Moktar, and Huf Dun (Ornithopods); Chamonaur, Ichthyodont, Panna dragons, Kebbs, and Droffi (Sauropods); and the genetically modified crossbreeds of the Malosaurs and Thuvasaurs (Ornithopod-Ceratopsian).[97]

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[95] The similarities between certain predatory dinosaur skulls and Krayt Dragon skulls are due to similar design or crossbreeding during this period. According to Sith paleontologist Erastus Sallacine, the ancient Sith also experimented upon dinosaurs, breeding the War Rhinos and War Behemoths.

[96] Agamarian Beasts are a Tchuukthai colony. Tiss'shar, Serp, and P'w'eck are not from Trammis III.

[97] Frequently mistaken for such ones are the Mawgax Terror-cranes, which are avians; the Boar-wolves, which are Entelodonts; the Mudhorns, which are Rhinocera; the Cu-pa and Tauntauns, which are Reptomammals; and the great flying Rupings of Onderon, Soarers of Ammuud, Whirrds of Jarnollen, and Pterodactyls of Mandalore and Nilrebmah XII, which are Pterosaurs.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

BATTLE HYMNS

THE PAN-PRENEUR

The Night Queen had sent the Yinchorri to establish a colony on Yitheeth. The Yith were frightened at first, for they had already fled their first home of Yith, which their Pan-preneur progenitors called Pnakotus, when the Polypous devastated its waters, but they started to reason that because they were more intelligent than the encroaching adversaries, they could easily defeat them. Planning and embarking on a course of tactical sorties, the Yith succeeded in tearing open many of the turtle-headed Yinchorri, whose blood stained their shallow seas and reddened their once-green meadows. But in the heat of battle, they overlooked the fact that the Yinchorri had not put up much of a fight, and they concluded that it was because the Yith were indeed the superior race. It wouldn't be until later that they discovered the truth: the Yinchorri vanguard had merely been ambassadors sent to negotiate terms as to the partial use of their planet.

Now convinced that these Yith were a vicious and evil race, the main force of the Yinchorri army came to the ocean world of Yitheeth to avenge their fallen brothers, and this time with the Rolk Mahgir at their heels.[98]

Realizing that they'd made a grievous error in judgement that would see them wiped out, the Yith reached out telepathically to the Presidium on Pnakotus, pleading with their forebears to take over their conical, four-tentacled bodies so as to fight on their behalf in the coming battle.

On their beloved homeworld of Pnakotus (later called Savareen), which was yet suffering the effects of desertification, but upon which they'd built their Great Library, the Presidium served as the ruling body of the Pan-preneur. The call of their offspring from Yitheeth was as a threnody of death. The Pan-preneur had the gift of *exchange*. They could switch their consciousness with willing participants in order to have an interchange of knowledge and experience. Having done this with various races across the galaxy had afforded them a considerable degree of knowledge, which had been scrupulously recorded and embedded in their vast library.

They knew they could not decline, but to accept would mean the end of all that they'd come to know and love. As members of the Resolute, they had avoided conflict until now. But as they looked upon the grim faces of the foes gloating over the corpses of their offspring piled like misshapen hills across a scorched and ruddy plain, eager to make more hills, they were swayed to do what had previously been unthinkable. Two-thirds of their race, including the leaders in the Presidium, would take over Yith

[98] A race of Rozzum known as the Horned Death, *Rolk Mangir* is an acceptable alternate spelling.

bodies until the invading forces had been dealt with. The minds of the Yith would meanwhile remain safe inside Pan-preneur bodies on Pnakotus….[99]

The battle began. For all their size, the Rolk Mahgir proved cunning and quick, with armor-like skin that was near-impenetrable and an unyielding bite that could swallow limbs whole. The Yinchorri were also physically robust and driven by vengeance and hate. Unlike the Pan-preneur, they'd been bred to be fighters.

But the Pan-preneur were an Elder Race that possessed numinous talents. In that blood-sodden day, and at the cost of many lives, they achieved an awful victory.

When word of the Yinchorri defeat reached Thargorograht, she brooded over it. It was impossible for the Yith to have overcome them on their own; for this reason had she kept the main force of the Yinchorri for other engagements. *No, they had most certainly been given assistance,* she thought, chewing on possible solutions. *Yet, none passed through their gates or landed on their shores; help must have come by a different means.* She'd heard nothing of additional undersea forces on Yitheeth beyond the sentient sea-beasts they raised, but those were no threat. *To what family group do the Yith belong?* She sifted the immense knowledge-base that her underlings had built into the myriad strands of her nest over the long years. "Ah… there you are!" she echoed aloud, startling the thousands of insects that ever crept, crawled, buzzed, or burrowed around her. "*The Pan-preneur,*" she said to no one in particular, "they who can exchange their pneuma with other races. What a shame to waste that talent! If they wished, they could impress their will upon any mentally-weaker vessel, possess it, and keep it for themselves for as long as it suited their needs. Perhaps once they've tasted defeat, become embittered by trials, made hopeless by ordeals, they might consider an alliance with me…" As her court of multitudes looked lovingly upon their wise and beloved monarch, the Night Queen sent a message, ordering ship after ship of brutal Yinchorri and Rolk Mangir to Yitheeth and Pnakotus.

The Pan-preneur were utterly unprepared for the seemingly endless waves crashing upon their shores, nor had they carefully considered the ramifications of their choice to join the war. Their Great Library was now set ablaze, and in helpless dismay they watched as all they'd learned and stored over the vast aeons burnt to ash. Even worse was the loss of their original bodies, bodies that were housing the spirits and personalities of the Yith, for Thargorograht had ordered *those* as the main target.

By means of one of her rare Elder Sons, Atlachnacha, who agreed to leave the compulsive construction of the Great Web to the capable spinnerets of the Grey Weavers while he traveled to Pnakotus, Thargorograht made the Pan-preneur an offer. The gigantic arachnidlike creature hovered above the grieving Presidium and said, "My mother wishes you to know the following: I would have an alliance with you. You need not betray your people. We are plentiful enough to win this war. I wish only to have you make use of your special talents at a future time to aid me in the defeat of some of my *relatives* who are ravaging the galaxy, of which you are no doubt aware. I can protect you from them. *They* will not offer you this boon, for there

[99] "Pan-preneur" loosely means "Brain-gainers," a reference to their ability to exchange minds and knowledge. The Mon Calamari and Yma are among their offspring races, the latter of which led the Paxians in the sustainable colonisation of Darwyk in the Arrowhead.

is no kindness in them. Once they are defeated, we will have lasting galactic peace, between you and I, and between my offspring and your offspring, and you can rebuild what you've lost, for I too have a vast library."

"We do not wish your enmity, darkest Queen of the Night," the Pan-preneur replied to the emissary. "But we cannot commit to such a course at this time."

A shrewd response, Athlachnacha noted. They would be his mother's one day. "Naturally," he finally said. "But know this: You are a *Great Race!* Let not your allies or adversaries rob you of your due. When you are ready, reach your minds out to me. I will *hear*. And to prove my honorable intent, I share this with you: a colony of your offspring on Urthha is at this very moment under threat from an Elder Race! Also, Typhojem, my foul brother, has designs on this world. I have directed an independent force to attack his Xothian armies which will give you a brief window of time in which to save your offspring. The Mi-Go serve our mother, but they will not hesitate to do you harm as well, so you must be cautious. Use your powers to your advantage." With that, Athlachnacha led the Yinchorri and Rolk Mangir offworld.

Having already failed once, the Pan-preneur did not fail to act on her words and split into three different parties. They would either liberate the remnant of the Yith or perish in the attempt. To preserve their own race in the event that things did not go as hoped, the Presidium telepathically commanded the first group to remain hidden in the waters of Sonn Vilmari, an ocean world in the Outer Rim. The second group were to directly transfer themselves into the tormented Yith on Urthha. The third group, who were still occupying Yith bodies, now departed Yitheeth for Urthha.

The words of the Night Queen had proved true: the abhorrent Flying Polyps had fought a terrible war against those called the Polar Ones. But far worse, to their horror and surprise, their own brethren were these Polar Ones! The Q'rel were the Elder Race tormenting the Yith and had fallen to the zoophagous practice of eating Humans to become a hideous and hateful race of *Elder Things!* It broke the hearts of the Pan-preneur to see their gentle offspring used as playthings by these foul races.

The coming of the Pan-preneur led to all-out war. In the midst of these heated battles, the Shoggoth slaves rebelled against their Q'rel masters. As the Pan-preneur could not allow them to escape and destroy the Human habitations of the world above, they remained on Urthha where war with them would continue until they too were killed, contained in catacombs, or fled to the frozen north. The Great Race built a new megalithic City of the Archives in the jungles of hidden Pnakotis.

The Xothians arrived to do the bidding of Typhojem but they were yet thwarted by the mysterious D'mi'go, which led to the withdrawal of the Star-spawn, for the Xothians could not turn to stone the Yith inhabited by the Pan-preneur, who were now called the Great Race. It did not stop Typhojem reclaiming the lands of a now lost continent for his three offspring. Meanwhile, the Polypous aggressors who would not retreat were splattered across Urthha, and the Mi-Go, having stolen enough brains from their respective enemies, flew off buzzing and glibbering happily into the night.

Long years hence, with their numbers and civilization greatly reduced, the Presidium of the Pan-preneur pooled their great intellect and psionic powers to peer into the possible futures to see what course they aught follow. This was a lengthy process that took years, for there were many potential outcomes, and not a few argued that it

was a vain and foolish endeavor. One potentiality that they saw in vision was a dark time like no other in which the vast armies of abominations marched, wriggled, fluttered, and stooped obeisant before potent and nefandous gods of death who sent them forth to annihilate all.

The terrifying vision had a profound effect on the Pan-preneur, who were already scarred by the horrors they'd witnessed and participated in. In shame, they reached out to Thargorograht. At the centre of the Great Black Nest, the Night Queen bobbed her great black head and sent word upon a thread to Athlachnacha, who grinned and stared out upon her Great Web, now so vast that it crossed dimensions into several realms, including the Dreamlands. The Night Queen gifted the Pan-preneur one of her insectoid races, the Coleoptera: "Ever I am true to my word. Be true to yours! Inhabit these bodies, and you will be spared the coming destruction. You have already done well against my brother's forces… Let us continue that effort in secret!"

For the rest of the Pan-preneur, those on Sonn Vilmari remained within their underwater cities, venturing rarely into the galaxy, save when called to defend their home. Those on Urthha spent their days in their colossal, durable city. From there they would reach out to other minds, including those Humans who dominated the surface of the world, swapping them with their own so as to replenish all that they'd lost during the dark days of despair. And the Great Web offered much.

THE WINGED RACES

Most of the Children of the Firstborn were not skilled in combat and requested the support of parent and allied races. To that end, the Talortai, Kalai, Gaoul, and Tempestro led flocks of fierce avians such as the Galidyn, Sen-Dro, Kentra,[100] Ri'Dar, Ixlls, Vor, Tarong, Rishii, Banasthaurs, Pteropus, Jastaal, Klakar, Shashay, Pydyrians, and more to serve as rangers, reconnoiters, and fighters for worlds beset by troubles.

The Conclave of the Firstborn needed all the help they could get. So it was with gladness that they accepted the willing aid of the winged Human crossbreeds called the Shaliz'Na. But the controversial decision to work with the Hawkmen, the name given to the mixed-Human race, provoked the wrath of some on the Council, and they were forced to retract their official endorsement. The Pteropus, however, agreed to serve alongside the Shaliz'Na, holding no particular animosity towards Man.

The Pteropus were renowned for their intelligence and loyalty, but in the age of ignorance and superstition that followed the Twilight Wars, a false report about them being vampires spread, causing them to be hunted to near extinction. A handful of survivors fled to Aubadas and devolved into the Katikoot, only for legends of vampirism to give way to tales of zombie-like creatures.

Others who might have provided succor, such as the Sharalian race of Gwaihul, were embroiled in their own conflicts. A wicked clutch had come to serve the Wind Walker, who haunts the boreal worlds, out of which a strange poem emerged:

[100] The Tessent idol was fashioned on the Kentra.

Kiros and Shar have traveled far,
The Convoree appear to me,
Flee the owl-eyes of the Draugr-Wight,
The Inhabiting Spirit that stalks the night…

The Allied Races were not alone in putting their airborne races to good use. The Maldont were prevalent in these days, with their Stenax branch commonly sent to battle against the winged Children of the Firstborn.

The Human world of Ardana had been taken by the non-winged variety of Maldont known as the Orcus. They were sent to engagements across the galaxy as foot soldiers. As with the Stenax (who looked down on them for their inability to fly), their culture was strictly hierarchical, but while the Orcus also paid homage to the God of Fire, Sithlan, and his servant, Vol, their worship went primarily to Vol's consort, the Great Goddess, who at this time they revered as Vana. Unlike the Stenax, they'd crafted a technologically-advanced society, albeit built on the backs of enslaved Humans and lower-class Orcus. Ardanan cities were modeled on designs drawn up by Human scientists they'd abducted. Their latest batch was tasked to build them mammoth robots akin to the ones said to have rampaged across Sol and Shogun. After the first model was tested and deemed satisfactory, a large number of the Stone Giants were put in production. The Orcus called them the Ardana Shadex, and not only would they make the Goddess proud, they would elevate the Orcus past the Stenax in importance.

But the Stone Giants would never travel further than the Inner Rim, for the scientists had covertly built in them a code that would override all other commands: "Destroy the Stone Giants! Destroy the Orcus!" The Ardana Shadex obeyed, and by the time the ferocious clashes were over, they'd reduced themselves to shattered, scattered parts and the Orcus to disparate clans fighting for scraps, leaving Ardana to be taken over millennia hence by the near-Human Mosciive, who renamed it Simocadia.[101]

THE REVWIEN AND THE PARWIEN

The wicked race of the Maldont departed for Revyia, which had become the staging grounds for an assault on the Tingel Arm. That it was also a world that produced considerable healing agents, preventing the spread of diseases that wracked entire worlds, made it a prime target for Thargorograht, who demanded the Revwien supply her forces exclusively in exchange for protection during the war.

The mosaic race of winged Maldont were distantly related to the sapient and terrifying Minatum, their Tulvaree offspring, and the non-sapient Gralloc, Mynock, Vynock, Fynock, and Shylock. The Maldont had not long before emerged scathed from a civil war with a faction that, under the leadership of a Maldont from Corsin, chose to serve the Fāta as *protectors* of Mankind instead of its destroyers.

[101] The only surviving Stone Giant to be deployed offworld lost his memory during a crash-landing on Terra II. There, the Human child who found the robot taught him to choose peace and love, leading him to sacrifice his own life to protect his companion from the military's overreaction to his arrival.

To ensure loyalty and the success of the mission, the Night Queen put the two-headed, serpentine Slith of Sathiemon in charge, and they were accompanied by a large mob of Thalassian Human marauders and the crystalline-arachnoid Tholians.

Through a treacherous hypertunnel to Revyia in the Nharqis'I Nebula burrowed by the black flames of Nharqis'Al, one of the larger Leviathans, the Maldont followed, intending to disperse the Thalassian forces and the recalcitrant Tholians to nearby sectors once they arrived. The Slith drove the Leviathan before them, unaware that the Tholians had sabotaged the mission, having earlier poisoned the Leviathan.

The sick and maddened creature flung the vessels of the Slith and their armies through the ruptured Hyperspace barrier. A few managed to survive and find their way to a world in the Gordian Reach, leaving only a single task force to arrive on Revyia. The Nharqis'Al stayed within the nebula to recuperate, and it is said he yet dwells there, devouring all who enter, for which reason Nharqis'I is called "the Death Place."

The aerial cousins of the Revwien were known as the Parwien (now the Parwan). At this time, they dwelt amongst the clouds of Revyia from which they regularly visited their terrestrial relations, sharing whimsical stories of fantastic creatures, unusual plants, and strange exploits they'd seen or heard of. Now that war had cruelly chosen to visit their shores, the Parwien descended to meet with their cousins, this time to employ the art of *Tyia* to call upon their parent race for help.

The Asogians heard the summons and contacted the Gree.

The Gree were then beset by enemy forces striking at their cities on Malanose in the Gree Enclave, one of which housed a restorative pool known as the Totth'k Lotos in the city of Soolen, which provided healing waters for the many injured. Other forces hit Lonatro, where their vast farms and botanical gardens provided food for billions. Despite the ongoing aid of their offspring races, such as the Aggorons, the Gree could not help at this time, and they called out to another.

One would not be reproached for mistaking the Revwien and other protector creatures that dwelt on this world for large, exotic plants, but it was a mistake that cost the Maldont and Human hunting parties their lives until the truth was at last discovered by Czaxu-Kluthu, the two-headed Slith commander. "Send a heavy guard to the Hypergates," commanded the left-head that was Czaxu as he glided along the multi-colored Sacred Grove of Wiën within which stood the Ancients of the Revenir, who were the Eldest of the Revwien.

"Kill anything unfamiliar that moves out of the jungle," added the right-head that was Kluthu. "They will not escape or be able to summon aid."

"This will avail you nothing," said Avatym, one of the Ancients of the Revenir.

"Do as we ask," Czaxu started, "produce medicines for our forces, train our people in your methods, and we will put you in charge of production across the galaxy."

"We cannot be bought," Avatym replied. "We would gladly procure medicine for the servants of the Night Spirit, but not to the exclusion of any."

"That is an untenable position," Czaxu reasoned. "You will be exterminated if you do not obey, and our Mistress will simply find others to replace you."

"She would have done so already if it were so simple," Avatym returned.

"You would rather taste the fires of destruction?" Kluthu inquired.

"Domination or destruction…" said Wotung, another of the Ancients, who sighed aloud, shaking his pulpy head.

"We will not respond to such threats," Wotung's companion, Xhosa, added.

"Then you are unreasonable," the left-head of the Slith replied, "for that is the natural cycle of the universe, with one leading to the other, back to the other endlessly… and so those with the greatest resources and power remain on top."

"For a time, perhaps," acknowledged Avatym the Ancient.

"Oppressive order begets crime and revolution," started Wotung, "which terrifies the people, who demand oppressive order, which begets crime and revolution."

"So order is justified at any cost, with chaos regularly reintroduced to remind the people and keep the circle in motion," Xhosa concluded. "Two heads of the same beast."

"You are indeed sage as our masters have said," the right head of the Slith answered. "It is the way of the worlds which e'er rotate on. Only the fool resists."

"A fool, perhaps, but you fail to see a higher order above the circle, an end to the cycle that has been forecast: a promise of the *severance* of the two heads and restoration of the days of peace and love…"

"Thuwisten fables!" Czaxu scoffed. "Even if true, *you* will not be alive to see it!"

"Perhaps not," Wotung mused, "but it is the nature of the light to resist the dark."

"We would spare you," the Slith replied truthfully, "but we are but the first wave, and if we disobey, our own lives are forfeit," Kluthu added. Czaxu's tongue darted out anxiously. "Perhaps if we believed your superstitions, we might even join you."

"I am sorry you do not," declared Avastan. "But perhaps in time…"

"So are we," Czaxu We said. "We will spoke well of you to our brood and kin."

"Burn the grove," ordered Kluthu.

Fire engulfed the Sacred Grove of Wiën, and the cries from the burning Revwien reached up to the Heavens. It was not the end for the Ancients of the Revenir, however, for the Slith did not understand the Bond-Circle of the Thuwisten nor the seeds that had been planted which contained their souls. What was fire to Tyia but the *Breath of God*? It would take long years, but the Ancients of the Revenir would return.

The Slith glided away in search of other groves, but they were distressed by the sudden appearance of luminescent, stingray-like forms that dropped down from the sky, for the Ahra Naffi had come in answer to the summons, and Czaxu-Kluthu wondered if perhaps there might something to Thuwisten fables. And so they returned to their home and told stories to their kin and brood of the great Tyia and the wise Ancients of the Revenir who could not be bought and feared nothing in the worlds.

With the Ahra Naffi came the Lafrarians, their offspring race, who had recently bolstered the fighting armies of the Lur and H'relac then assailed by Hiitite forces and the arcane Fosh. Unable to access the Hypergate on that world, the Ahra Naffi employed their own gifts to open the wormhole now known as the Moshaw Dark Star, allowing the Parwien to escape and settle a planet they'd later call Parwa in the Seswenna sector. From there, the Parwien went off to find additional aid in the battleships of the Orryxians, Shistavanen, and Minotaur-looking Averist warriors who arrived just as the next wave of wicked marauders came to Revyia.

Were it not for the Orryxians—who yet held a fondness for Humans—all of the adversarial forces would have been slain that day, but those who threw down their arms were allowed to live and depart. Fearful of returning to their masters, they resettled on nearby worlds and became the Cilare, Sernpidalians, and Argazdan.

THE VOID OF CHOPANI

Having thwarted one threat, the Tholians now put the second part of their plan into action. The insectoid Verpine, Kibnon, and Seltorian races—who the Tholians had bio-engineered from their own genetic material and that of other select insectoid races they'd collected on the colony worlds of Goratak III, Kolaador, Shogun, Haroon, Mygeeto, Tholia, and Thule—now joined with the Langhesi Vanguard of the Allied Races, providing them weapons, shields, and ships that they'd developed in secret.

At the same time, the Equani, Sipsk'ud, Pitrillistians, and Lorrdian Humans joined up with the Vanguard—initially made up of the Forso, Kauronians, Simento, and Threk—to expel or destroy the invaders and enemies of the Tingel Arm, and so successful were they that the Langhesi Vanguard moved on to free other regions.

The Vanguard drove out of Thalassa the Thalassian shipwrights and slavers, who were forced to reestablish their operations on an uninhabited world in the Meram sector that they later designated Thalassia.

The Vanguard also devastated the Ch'hosk of Antmuel VI, though they provided their remnant safe passage to the Corosi sector, where they changed their name to Proliferans and birthed a thriving empire on their new world.

But even victories have consequences. The Equani were ever after split across political and religious divides, with the Thakwaash and Nazzar choosing to go their separate ways. This proved unfortunate for the former who were preyed upon by the Wind Walker, who had come to their world to feed, and though they managed to fend him off, they were left seared and *fragminded*.

The Sunesi had been travelling the galaxy at this time with their offspring race, the Fareen, to whom they'd taught great discipline and self-control, which enabled the Fareen to better use their natural pheromones to facilitate rapid-healing and, in the case of the mortally afflicted, to ease their suffering into the next world.

Fareen healers had become a common sight on battlefields across the galaxy, but as the war stretched on, they began to feel disdainful towards all combatants. They were hardly the only ones to think so, but they kept such thoughts to themselves, sharing them only with their fellow Fareen and their sister race, the Zolan (later Zolanders), with whom they shared a bond.

But a mysterious event that happened in the Ch'hopani sector sealed their fate.

Stars and planets in the sector suddenly disappeared without a trace! And with them went a large group of Tholians, Fareen, Godoans, Ahra Naffi, Halosians, and Verpine. The area was thereafter called the Void of Chopani. This was the final straw for the Fareen who then declared they'd had enough of war and would no longer participate in something that only ever resulted in tragedy and suffering. They would instead march towards a drumbeat of their own, away from galactic conflict. The Fareen pulled back to their homeworld, averring their neutrality and warning that any who came uninvited would not be met with welcome.

The Sunesi let them be for a time, but they soon grew indignant after stories reached their ears of Fareen using their pheromones to manipulate others to gain power and

wealth. When they came to confront them about this, a heated exchange of words passed between them so that in anger the Sunesi dubbed them the *Falleen*—a name which their defiant progeny embraced. The Falleen, in turn, charged that their manipulative nature had driven away their offspring, which begat the saying, "The cunning of the Sunesi is as boundless as the Void of Chopani," and, incensed, they parted ways.

What none knew was that the Tholian Coalition had maneuvered it. For long years they endured the cruelty of war under the vicious Old Ones, but they kept silent about their feelings. Knowing that treason would never be forgotten and they would live as a persecuted people, they began searching for a means of escape. Tholian scouts were expert trackers; they had heard of the fabled Great Gate and, after a methodical search that narrowed the possible locations, at last discovered it. With the means of making a trans-sidereal escape from Skyriver to another dimension, and to ensure they did not end up back in Illathurion or worse, a period a tinkering began. Though considerable time was spent re-engineering it to function as a proper Trans-dimensional Gate, their task was not yet complete when, due to the conflict that erupted in the area, they were forced to precipitously rupture the dimensional walls lest others discover and abscond with the gate. This triggered an unstable wormhole that ripped the very stars and planets out of the sector, relocating them and anyone in the vicinity out of Skyriver to a realm beyond. In the end, they were safe, as were those who'd inadvertently been taken with them, to start life anew in a strange galactic milieu. So the mystery of the Void of Chopani became legend.

THE PEACEABLE WOOKIEES

"I wonder how many other dimensions contain Humans…" Tilotny asked this one day whilst espying Mankind after the breaching of the Chopani sector.

"How many realms would you have us bring to ruination?" Sine demanded, wondering if his sister had even greater ambitions than she let on.

"No others," Tilotny assured him. "They are not my concern. The wars we've sparked have a grander purpose than these *petty* squabbles." Philosophy was not her preferred train of thought, but ever since her encounter with the thing on the throne, she'd been assailed by various ruminations along these lines.

"I can show you another," Ap expressed with a fervor that caused Sine's eyes to narrow in mischief.

"Has your Infinity Realm spawned?" queried Sine.

"It has no need… space is limitless."

"And not time?"

"I once thought so," Ap replied, crinkling up his brow. "Now I am not so sure."

"Let us see it," Tilotny requested. In the blink of an eye, they were there. It was considerably smaller by comparison but still rich and vibrant and deep. "How do you know of this realm?"

"I will tell you a tale…"

After many fierce battles fought in the Empyrean Wars, the Wookiees had a sharp disagreement amongst themselves. They had long been friends with many races and cultures, including the Gran. Queen Doellin of the Gran had recently declared that since war had proven to be a pox upon their civilization and the galaxy, they would cease all military engagements. This speech influenced a faction of Wookiees who became convinced they should follow suit. To avoid the further ire of their comrades, they departed Rwook for what they thought was the forest world of Corlaasi where they might resume the docile lifestyle they'd led before the wars.

It is not known what drew them to this particular forest world—for there were many in those days—only that it looked and smelled like their homeworld. But once they'd settled upon it, they began to uncover disquieting signs indicating that this was not the planet they thought it was. For one thing, the stars were not in the right configuration. They were not right at all. No gate had ever been known to lead to the wrong destination, but when they returned to the gate, they could not find it. Wookiees were skillful woodsmen who did not lose their sense of direction. But they were also a practical people who could not expend weeks searching for answers to this mystery.

Many of these Wookiees had been artists on Rwook and famous for their beautiful sculptures; their most recent designs were of Gran-headed Human figures, signifying their esteem for the former and fascination with the latter, particularly their industriousness and rapid propagation. So, as artists, they could not help but be drawn to the mysterious pyramids that dotted the landscape of the central continent.

Sooty, red, and made of a hard substance fashioned from petrochemicals but with no discernable entrances and no people or civilization to account for them, the pyramids were yet another inscrutable mystery. Some of the elder Wookiees warned that they had best be avoided, for they'd heard that the fallen Eruthros and their allies built such things, but their voices were ignored, for who could resist such allurements as these? Besides, none knew for sure who they belonged to, and with no one around to tell, even the skeptics had to admit that they held a certain mystic charm.

The Wookiee population grew and spread out. Renaming themselves the Jaenshi (the "peaceful nation"), they utilized the pyramids as centers for each clan, which was made up of thirty or so individuals. By the time of the third generation, the pyramids had been turned into objects of idolatry, for the Jaenshi were replacing old concepts with new and strange ideas.

Their story might have ended there had not the rotten fruit of war come to visit—and the pyramids had not been made without purpose. The Steel Angels had come to Corlos, for that was this world's name. A brutal, militaristic cult of Human soldiers, they'd been drawn here—though not for its beauty. After numerous bloody conflicts with races equivalent to the Rozzum and Nytocris, it is said they'd gone mad, having been seduced into a might-makes-right philosophy centered on the worship of a pale, sword-wielding child-god they called Bakkalon. Some claimed he was but the Soul-Sucker derived from the myths of Lord Bas the Immortal, the Shining Youth from Beyond who never grew old, but others knew him for Zhahar, the Treader of the Dust.

Foreswearing notions of peace and love as weakness, the Steel Angels had irascibly splintered off from their Federal Empire, gaining fanatics and child soldiers with whom

they began their conquest of the non-Human races, which their fiendish religious text deemed "soulless." And it was with this mindset that they met the Jaenshi.

For daring to defend one of their pyramids, the children of the Jaenshi were hanged, impelling some of the Jaenshi to abandon their peaceful ways. It would not avail them, for the enemy were better armed and in greater numbers. But the Steel Angels would not prevail either, infected as they were by the very violence they heralded. When the image of the pale child reflected inside one of the pyramids, frenzied fanaticism took hold of them, and they began sacrificing their own offspring to the evil god.

A few, jaded though they were, would not support this madness and fought back. Civil war erupted on Corlos. Those who'd come to regret their association with this despicable cult took their vessels to a lonely part of the northern forest where they'd received a report by scouts of a door that led to other lands. Desperate, they followed the scouts to the strange gate and, risking all, entered it, emerging on Corlaasi. Most started a new life, but some were seduced by their dark past and migrated to Hollon III, where they reignited their evil ways and came to be known as the Cult of Kordil.

The Jaenshi could not have known that Corlos had been a trap from the beginning or that the pyramids built by vanished thralls served as a transdimensional portal, for their builders were not servants of the Old Ones or the Architects but those malevolent and unknown Ancient Ones who are ever seeking dominion and destruction and for whom it mattered little who the pyramids ensnared nor from what realm they came, since most people could be enticed to bloodshed. Yet, as this had not worked upon the peaceful Jaenshi, others were lured instead. The Humans had better suited their needs, and in the massacre of the innocents (both of Jaenshi and Humans), an Infernal Gate was now generated that allowed Corlos to become the throneworld for the Demon Prince, Saagael. His victory proved short-lived, however, as Corlos was removed from the Thousand Worlds by whatever benevolent power governed that realm and sent to the black heart of its own mephitic domain as a place of punishment.

"We are not unlike these ancient devils," Cold Danda Sine stated bitterly. "We could have achieved our goals by means other than violence—*had we wished it*."

Tilotny turned from the mad galaxy before her to look at him. His murky, spheroid face looked back with no hint of its usual mirth and irreverence. *Could it be that he is feeling guilt?* As if for the first time, she marveled at what gloriously bizarre and awe-inspiring beings they were. "*We* did not make them violent. And no lives have we taken save for the very wicked. Besides, have we not increased the Humans' strength, lifespan, and procreative drive to make up for the losses suffered?"

"It is the nature of those seeking dominion to spill blood," Ap stated. "As to these Humans, they cannot help but propagate war. This evidence is again before us."

"Yes," Tilotny agreed, "and it is *only* through the acceleration of conflict and moral decay that the Celestials will be exposed as ineffectual and evil."

"And yet they have made no move against us…" Sine mused.

"Have they not? Perhaps it is because they are feckless as well. Once we are the sovereigns of all, there will be no more wars. We have only done what needed doing."

"So we tell ourselves," Sine rejoined darkly.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

GALAXY OF THE VAMPIRES

THE SILENT VOICES OF ANZA'ATH

The throne room of Dakara Ramises smelled of decaying zinthorns. As he drew nearer to the throne itself, Commander Erleg Litchem realized that the death-odor of Ramises was far worse. One of several warriors vying for the position of Potentate of his house after the current one was bifurcated in combat, Litchem focused instead on the black and pink varietals native to Zin Taal that had been strewn along the walls beneath shadow boxes that held grotesque trophies taken from the various civilizations his master had conquered. But on catching sight of the yellow irises that beamed out of Ramises' dark cowl, Litchem stiffened to attention. It was not every day that one was summoned by a member of the Shadow Council. *Just as well*, he thought, suppressing it quickly in case the master could read minds.

"Ambition is a double-edged sword," the Black Pharoah of Roan croaked. "If we are to best serve ourselves, the empire, and the gods, we must wield it with ferocity… and yet if we are not vigilant to keep it in alignment with our betters, the blade will turn upon our necks. This is part of the Riddle of the Ziggurat. Do you understand?"

"I do, my lord," Litchem replied, bowing his head before him. The gesture was not merely a symbolic one. If a lord was displeased with an acolyte, he would chop off his head… or worse.

"To ensure that you succeed in your ambitions, the Lord of the Dead has sent us a great gift!" He raised a crooked, skeletal finger and shifted his trunk forward as if to leap. "Through the Infernal Gate have come… *sentinels*." One of several blackened, spiked spheres floated into view next to Ramises' head. Litchem choked back a gag-reflex. It was a revolting thing. He could feel its mad thirst to kill. "They are made from the tanned skins of the dead and hold the minds of the recently departed," the Archimage laughed, amused by the very ingenuity of it. Litchem kept himself from visibly shuddering. "They will obey basic commands from the strong and will prove useful in *hunting*. There are said to be thousands, but the Master does not part with his pets easily. In exchange, he demands living specimens from Anza'ath."

Anza'ath was not known to be hospitable. The climate, water, and temperature were pleasant enough, but it wasn't in the tangible ways that the world was off… It was, rather, the miasmic spirit of the place. *Irrational*, some said in response to that, but they had never visited Anza'ath as Litchem had years earlier when he'd been tasked to make allies of the colonists, a strange folk who spoke in riddles of the glowing aurora that whispered to them at night. Sith scientists later said this was nothing but a luminescent band of gases and that the "silent voices" were but the

delusions of a superstitious race. But Litchem knew better. The nocturnal voices of the Sea of Memory spoke from the Darkness… and even he could not identify the aurora's origin or to what the voices might be ascribed.

The earliest visitors to Anza'ath were Sephi-Eruthros settlers from Azura in the Oricho sector. Azura was a stunning world of unclouded skies, vast lapis lazuli mines, and cerulean lakes. The settlers had been forced to depart after fighting a terrible battle with the Witch-Queen Azura and her Syk Magic-Men. Although successful in forcing her exile to Mongo, their forces had been diminished, leaving them unable to properly deal with the arrival of the disturbing Polydroxol, a mysterious race who could eerily mimic their form and speech.

Now, instead of the blues, yellows, and fabulous greens, red and brown greeted their days, and the strange, shining Sea of Memory colored their dreams. Still, the people made do, and they had peace for a time. They called their world Anza'ath, meaning, "the answer," since it served as the solution to their problems. In the tongue of the Sith, it was called Anzat, and its people Anzati, the "little snakes."[102]

It is not known from whence the virus came. It occurred in the days after the population had grown considerable enough for the colonists to have to split into several large clans. Some blamed it on an alchemist probing the mysteries of strength and longevity; some blamed a crash-landed ship from Tloong, though such wreckage was never found. The Silent Voices keep silent, and the Sea of Memory has forgotten, but there is a recovered fragment from a century after the events that provided a clue.

Though scholars have said that the Pru Wei Papyrus is an unrelated poetic invention, several have acknowledged that Asur is a known alternate name for Azura, just as Za'ath and Zatus were alternates for Anza'ath:

> No sickness came to Za'ath,
> To the People of Asur,
> Only sweetly souring shanties,
> That e'er pushed and pulled,
> What clouds peered down on Zatus?
> What wraiths through opened gate,
> With dreams that blight and blacken,
> To hunger, gnaw, and sate?
> None still live to tell the tale,
> Of she who stands behind,
> The vacant and unholy stares,
> The Horla of the Mind…

Whatever illness it was, it spread rapidly, with many of the clans falling into the grip of a malaise none had ever before suffered, a fever dream in which the aurora

[102] The planet's nickname had previously been Zatus, not Anzat (though Zatus itself has sinister connotations), indicating that the Anza'ath name wasn't changed until after the arrival of the Sith.

revealed its true face. Not all awoke, for those that attempted to resist its hateful grin died, having been weakened by long exposure to the aurora. But those who did were no longer what they had been. They had become something *other*, something that ached and hungered. When they rose up from their cots, pallid and grim, their memories from their life before had faded; their thoughts fixated on the feeding.

They first became known to their prey, those for whom the Sea of Memory had not visited its nocturnal embrace, those who now screamed in terror as tendrils hidden in the cheeks of friends and family shot out and slithered their way into their victim's nostrils, grasping furtively until finally reaching the brain where they drank of their essence—the *great soup*—leaving behind only dead and empty husks.

The beasts of Anza'ath did not last many years after the change, but neither did the beasts satisfy their cravings, and it is a mercy to them that they were not farmed. Of those that survived, the Azuran Cave Treaders had migrated with the original colonists when first they came to Anza'ath. Able to grow to half a meter in length, the herbivorous King Crickets tasted foul even to the now ravenous clans, and those that endured predation were similarly transformed, losing a pair of legs and growing long, stinging tails. Ever after they were known as Azuran Stingcrawlers, but the locals laughed and simply called them irate bugs.

"We must begin to harvest from other worlds," declared Master Wrennin. Sable-headed, with drear eyes and the telltale Elven ears of the Sephi, Bracken Wrennin had always been a striking figure at nearly seven feet. But where his once disarming, bright-eyed smile offset his imposing stature, he now stood as one foreboding and terrible. "Otherwise, we will not survive. Let us meditate and see what the Sea reveals to us, for it always provides…"

It was a short time later, at dusk, that Commander Erleg Litchem and his forces arrived. He did not relish this mission, noting with displeasure the same rank and unidentifiable effluvium that permeated the atmosphere on his prior visit, but one did not disobey the direct order of the Ninûsgidzida. *Such is the price for ambition*, he thought.

Human on his mother's side, Litchem was charming, ruddy, and handsome by his people's standards, for which reason he had two wives, three concubines, and at least three lovers. His affable and disarming nature hid his ambition and political savvy, which he'd used to climb the byzantine ladder of success on Drômencas. Groomed first by his father, who was himself of royal blood, then by the hideous Ssither, it had been under their training that he'd come to discover the depths of anger that he'd needed to survive the rigors of physical and political combat, the same anger that he'd channeled to become Commander. He once asked Anetan-Trath if this state would subside once he'd attained his goals, but the hooded Serpent Lord had grinned and said, "Only for the weak who crave dazzling trinkets and base adulation. For those who keep their eyes and ears open to the truth of a galaxy in disorder, there is no amount of jewels that will stave off the rage." Litchem would come to find these words disheartening, if true, though it was less the galaxy that he found wanting but the Sith Empire itself. He kept these thoughts hidden deep within, yet it was what drove him to succeed the fallen Kissai priest to become Potentate. And if he returned

with several Anzati captives, who knows how far he could go. But might he do with that power once he attained he didn't know. He couldn't think that far ahead.

Despite the awe in which they were held, Litchem was not a fan of the Sephi. Years earlier, he'd been part of an engagement to take the isolated White Bird Clan of Besspin Kaalieda, a gorgeous world at night, with its effulgent moons casting an ethereal light on sprawling chrysolite gardens. But the Sephi had repelled them at every turn. This was hardly anomalous. The orbital city of Ethania, created in memory of the cloud cities of Dream, had also fiercely resisted Sith incursions.

It wasn't concern over the Anzatis' prowess that bothered him. Certainly, it would be no easy task to take several captives, though he had a large enough task force of talented and experienced warriors to ensure success. It was a *sour* feeling. The freakish sentinels must the cause of it, he reasoned. He'd have just as soon left the foul spheres behind, but not even his capricious master denied the fearsome Lord of the Dead, who was one of their primary gods, he whom the Sith called Hoyakut'ari. It was rumored that the sentinels were fashioned after Kopa Khan. Litchem didn't care. He wasn't sure such primordial entities actually existed, though most accepted and even worshipped the Queen of Air and Darkness alongside the Old Ones and the Sith gods.

He'd heard things about the Lord of the Dead… *secret* things… that he was the Vampire King, that he walked the worlds as Count Eosforos and in other guises; that he brought life back to the *Dread Mother* and other Witch-Queens who'd once ruled Drômencas; that not one but *five* beings dwelt inside of him. As Eosforos, he was the *Enemy*; as Nesuferit, he was the *Stranger*; as Ibaulis, he was the *Friend*; as Ianus, he was *Parent and Portal*; as Helel, he was the *Lover*. For this reason, the other Immortal Gods did not fully trust him, though, of course, there were none that they trusted.

Litchem had long brooded over these matters, discussing them only with his companions bold enough to talk of such things. As far as he was concerned, the Lord of the Dead was the most reliable of the Immortal Gods. While the others bore epithets that emphasized their power and terror, it seemed that if any of them were worthy of veneration, it was the Hoyakut'ari, for although one would fight tooth-and-claw to avoid his embrace, some of the priests said he would take his subjects to another realm. Litchem hoped this mission wouldn't bring him to that realm sooner than he'd prefer.

The Anza'ath had been divided into high and low clans. Of the former three, which were the oldest and most prestigious of the tribes, there were the Zaatus, Zattanoi, and Zatarain. Given the grander architecture of the Zatarain, Litchem reasoned that it housed the most prominent. Knowing it would look better for him if he captured these rather than those of the low clans, he sent to their dwellings the hideous sentinels, and these now flew off led by the saturnine Ziakas.

The Anzati no longer required sleep. Instead, they spent six hours each night meditating on the Sea of Memory, seeking out visions of coming hunts while warming in the ebb and flow of the *galactic soup*. It was said that they could do this even offworld, but any who failed to tap in for longer than a week would go mad and die.

And so, Bracken Wrennin and his kin had not been surprised when the floating, ghoulish globules attacked, though they were surprised by how fast they were, causing several to perish when the sentinels impaled their craniums, spouting geysers

of ichor. But Wrennin had heard the call of the Silent Voices and grabbed his blade. With a growl he threw himself upon the hateful entity that came for him. One of its spikes pierced his hand, but Wrennin endured it, managing to make some shallow cuts upon its carapace. The creature pulsed furiously in his grasp, but Wrennin held on tight. His cheeks quivered as his hidden tentacles whipped out and attached to the angry sphere, penetrating the gashes he'd made.

Furiously, Bracken Wrennin began to feed!

When it was complete, he felt such ebullience he nearly shouted aloud. With the life-force of the sentinel within him, he gained a new ability and could now communicate telepathically. He knew that the Sith had come to take them to their accursed planet, but now he understood the intent behind it. His people would not be used or preyed upon! *They would be the predators!* He mentally reached out to the leaders of the clans who, although surprised, spread the word: *Feed at will!*

Litchem had by now grown concerned. On his orders, Sith forces now stormed the Zaatus compounds only to report back that no one there. Every domicile sat empty and dark. Litchem employed his phrenic talents to inquire of the sentinels, but they weren't responding. His psychic sensors were practically screaming that something was off. Something very bad had occurred. Death was coming for him

Before he could call a withdrawal, Anzati by the hundreds burst out of the darkness of the trees surrounding the camp, swarming the Sith. Taken by surprise, many were fed upon that day, but those who did not panic remembered their training in physical combat and the magical arts and put up a formidable defense.

So too might they have succeeded had not the sentinels emerged… *transformed!* They had not withered and died as Anzati victims normally did, but as with the Azuran bugs, they were *changed*. Strange energies crackling like purple lightning danced upon them. These anguished and ravening globes then surged forth!

In the midst of battle, the Sith watched as their fellows were attacked and seemingly killed, only to get up again as mad and ravening *things!* Fearing that undeath awaited them, the Sith forces became unnerved and fled. Now, separated from his troops and encircled by masses of creatures, Litchem fought like one possessed. Wrennin watched, impressed, as the Sith leader held his own for longer than most would have. Grinning, heaving, and hungry Anzati bested and held him down while Wrennin stalked over. He thought it fitting that he do the deed, and he kneeled, as if in ardor, to penetrate his olfactory orifices.

Just then, the sentinels interfered, their will forcing him to stand back.

Out of the circle of sentinels, Ziakas descended upon Litchem; the Sith's throaty screams giving even Wrennin pause. Once the deed was done, and Litchen stirred, he understood. Here was a black and sacred act. A dark rebirth.

The remaining unscathed Sith now drew together back-to-back and cast a spell of *lazgur* that erected a protective barrier around them. Their adversaries surrounded it, deathly faces pressing against the field like hungry ghasts from the bowels of the world below. The enchantment would last only as long as their strength held out, and that was waning, but the thought of being transformed into something halfway between living and dead bolstered them. The barrier moved as they did, and in the

time in which it held, they'd gathered the bodies of Litchem, two other fallen comrades, and two dead Anzati. Two sentinels managed to breach the barrier, but the Sith moved quickly to cover them in heavy cloaks and protective spells.

As they moved towards the gate, the vampiric creatures that enclosed the sphere of protection followed, unwavering, and they could see Wrennin smile. Litchem, meanwhile, writhed in pain as he underwent the process of *becoming*. Healing was not a power the Sith possessed, but they knew enough to render him unconscious.

Without warning, one of the sentinels broke loose. In the havoc that ensued, the barrier failed. The Sith stood unprotected and trembling. But to their surprise, the Anzati did not attack. Uncannily, they stood watching with eyes of hunger and death. "Send word back to your masters," Wrennin said as he approached. "Tell them we will be powerful *allies*, but we will not be *thralls*!" So were the Sith allowed to bring Litchem and the other captured prey to the gate whereupon they hastened to their masters on Drômencas to relay the events that had transpired along with Wrennin's message.

The Ssither were fascinated by all that had occurred and agreed to ally with the Anzati. As to the altered sentinels, what they now called Devourers (*Derriphan* in the Sith tongue), they sent the captured one along with the infected Sith back to the crimson planet and its phantasmic lord to demonstrate the success of the mission.

Commander Litchem was taken in chains before the Archimage Ramises. As he gained consciousness, the hideous visage of the Lord of the Shadow Council grinned down on him. "I don't think you ever did understand the Riddle of the Ziggurat." When he remained silent, the Black Pharoah of Roan sneered. "I will tell you a secret. There are times, rare though they are, when there is a better use for those whose ambitions do not *align* with ours. I am sending you to my fellow Archimage, Sokratu the Elder. He has done impressive work! You will make an ideal speciman, I think!"

Litchem thought it odd that he could no longer detect the stench of death on Ramises. But neither did he care. All he felt now was rage and a burning desire to feed. He was made the catalyst for Sokratu's expanded procedures on life-extension and hybridization, and though he was no longer what he once was, now that his ambitions aligned with that of the Immortal Gods of the Sith, he eventually surpassed the rank of Potentate… for which he gave thanks to the Lord of the Dead.

THE BLACK PILGRIMAGE

[The following document is an exerpt from a larger work entitled *The Black Pilgrimage,* by Montague Rhodes. Hextrophon's copy of the manuscript appears to be missing, though given its scarcity and value, that does not come as a surprise.]

Vampires come in many forms; there are the parasitic Auran who conquered Auratera, the Reamar of Argoth, the Energy Vampires of Mandragora, and the Meki of Mekith and Simter. But these are but a sample. Thankfully less common are the bat-like Erloors and the cnidarianoid Star Vampires who are the Kindred. Most are solitary hunters, staying in the shadows or within their keeps, affecting a relative few over their long years. For this

reason had the Derriphan been covertly engineered, and had they gone undetected, entire nations and worlds would have been infected until only a galaxy of vampires remained.

Those who've made a serious study of the subject, as I have, point to the most common examples as those who psychogically but unconsciously drain the life-force of those around them, coining such toxic ones as 'reflexive vampires,' and it has long been suggested that, really, any carnivore that sustains itself on the flesh of another is a kind of vampire. But our concern is with those for whom the compulsion to feed is so intense that, as with the *corrupted* Lycanthrope (for there are noble ones), the notions of morality and compassion are wholly absent. It is these we understand to be Vampires.

In ancient texts, they are varied creatures and have had different names across different peoples: the Lamia, Oupire, Lûgat, and Kûkûdat are but old names. Justly are they regarded as monsters since, irrespective of the means by which they procure their prey, whether by seduction or violence, they are *cognizant* of the fact that it leaves their victims dead or at the point of death. And yet there are those who feel sympathy for even this kind, reasoning that they can no more help their cravings than any beast who must hunt and kill for its food. Thus, the very existence of that drive, which they had not asked for, must, by all rights, exclude them from our censure or make us sympathetic at the least.

What these would-be sympathizers (some of whom I suspect are but justifiers of their own forms of vampirism) don't understand is the wholly unnatural aspect of parasitism. Such a thing does not stem from the Force, which is founded on the mutually benevolent symbiosis of give-and-take and from which all life in the natural world originally began. "Ah, but the natural world is a harsh and cruel mistress," the opposition will argue. Indeed, this cannot be denied. But there is a missing piece to the picture, and that is the presence of the *Anti-Force*. The Anti-Force can no more be understood in purely scientific terms than can the Force, but its presence and effects are just as clear to see. The Anti-Force mimics life while at the same time betraying it; it takes but does not give.

Because the sources of both the Force and Anti-Force are invisible, spectral, and cosmic, they are said to be nonexistent. Thus, that which is unnatural or evil—having seeped into the bedrock of culture so early on that none now live who remember a time when it wasn't there—is regarded as indistinguishable from nature itself. So the scholar scoffs, unaware that things were not always as they are now. And so does the devotee of the Dark normalize vampirism, for they and their gods are its ultimate expression.

But not even those loathesome and eldritch entities, Mnggal-Mnggal and Waru, who are but grotesque manifestations of collective vampirism, can compare to the damage done by the *ideology* of vampirism, presented across the galaxy in far more charitable terms. So we come to the sociological aspects often overlooked in these examinations of the subject. It is not just the common criminal whom one can associate with the vampire—both take from their victims, deplete them, feed off of them, and sometimes even kill them—but the common social constructs themselves.

Entire societies are structured around a vampiric premise. While this is more obvious in the fortress worlds of warlords, tyrants, and Sith, dominated by steeltowns and industrial misery, we find the same basic foundation in supposedly free societies, only with an added façade, a layer of make-believe that disguises the fact that the upper

echelons prey on those beneath them, financially, psychologically, and even physically when it comes to the desire of the leaders to obtain greater resources or lands. But as this is done while pretending to offer something in return, freedom or the opportunity for wealth (though the reality for most is often so negligible as to be meaningless), the majority don't see through the vampires' greatest power—their ability to charm and deceive. The illusion they cast is strong enough to perpetuate the parasitic cycle year after year, century after century, until it became ubiquitous to nearly all governing bodies, including very terrible ones who know enough to proselytize the idea until it is deemed common sense, until the citizen accepts that this is the natural order of things and that any deviation from it is aberrant and punishable to one degree or another.

So successful has this been that even the poets and prophets who see through it and speak out against it cannot break the façade before their works too are assimilated, castrated, and regurgitated back as mere music for the masses.

Now that the real trick of the Vampire—to turn its prey into addicts who crave their predator—is understood, we may turn our attention back to the literal bloodsuckers and their cold and calculating masters who need not hide in the shadows but in plain sight.

There is a very old saying that has been found amongst the tombs and ruins of the Vampires of Séhal: "He who would drink the blood of his enemies and command unwavering fealty would voyage to Chorazin and pay obeisance to the Prince of the Cosmos." Of course, there is no such world in the known galaxy, but the allusion is clear enough to those who have delved into such matters. It is known as the Black Pilgrimage, and it is an invitation usually proffered to those already predisposed to vampirism in one of its many forms to embrace their darker impulses, signified by the journey to the Charnel House and its Charnel Gods. The voyage is literal for some but metaphoric for others. That aspect matters less than the fact that those who accept become conscious participants. No longer giving in to the darkness scratching at them from within, they are transmuted into embodiments of shadow, hunting with gleeful intent and malice. While hope yet exists for the weak, who might be redeemed, from the Black Pilgrimage there is no coming back!

The Conclave of the Firstborn reasoned that any race that could so easily contaminate entire civilizations posed a serious threat. Although the Vampires of Terra I had been subdued, the Rakshi neutralized, and the Anzati spread out and protected by allies, hidden enclaves of Nagas were yet at large, from which the Garhoon and Vorvon came.[103] And under the cover of night, led by Ziakas, the Derriphan went forth, infiltrating insular communities. From the Human colony on Davanna came the hypnotic Davannans; from the honorable Kentra came the Blood Spites; out of the Farghul came the Gorgand; from the Palidors emerged the Vathek of Strio; and out of isolated Sephi clans came the Blind Dead of Vanya and the arrogant Omec, who went on to dominate seven races who later fled to Terra II. So the Conclave sent warriors to track down the Derriphan and eliminate any of their fell races.

[103] The remnant of the Rakshi are today known as the Chestrashi, pronounced *kest-ra'shee*).

Some years hence, above Korma Berst in Pûrgrothiá, Celegians, Ky'lessans of KyLessia, and Murachaun of Nahsu Minor tracked down and destroyed the Derriphan. Some escaped through winding paths in the depths of N'kai back to the Hell-world of Orgus to report on the destruction of their brood, but Cold Danda Sine took Ziakas and the surviving Derriphan as pets, for he was amused by their resemblance to him. The Lord of the Dead was not pleased, but new sentinels were engineered by one of his foremost servants, a former Human mortician, but instead of flesh, they were given metallic bodies to hold the possessed brains of the recently departed.[104]

The effect of vampiric predation did not always result in vampirism, a fact that attests to the diversity of life and nature and the disposition of the victim. Lazuli prey emerged as the blue-skinned Enzeen of Ensolica. Sarkan prey became Barabel.

And millennia later, within the satellite galaxy of Pûrgrothiá, the vicious and prurient Tetsujin, who'd been exiled from Shogun by the Mandalorians to a dark and uninhabited planet they called Teru-Mitsu, found themselves altered into a strong people with a deathly pallor when they were attacked by the nomadic Garhoon.

The Garhoon had been drawn to Teru-Mitsu (which they renamed N'kai) by the evil entity that dwelt there. For this reason had they renamed their Tetsujin slaves after their Naga masters and the god of that world, and so the Tetsujin were ever after known as the Nagai, and their world as Nagi. Their transformation, however, gave the Nagai greater strength and resilience, which allowed them to overthrow the Garhoon and drive the vile Black Thing, who the Garhoon knew as the Sleeper of N'kai, to Yuth in the Yutan system. Yet, in the ruthless empire-building that followed, they alienated many of the neighboring races in Firefist, as Pûrgrothiá was then known, leaving them vulnerable when the Tof rose in power in their sector.

The Nioth-Korghai were a different type and one of the earliest Vampire kinds. Though they went to great lengths to hide their origins, even utilizing that hoary trope of pretending to be the creators of the Human race, the Nioth-Korghai were the fungoid spawn of the hidden, protoplasmic mass that was Abhoth.

Nioth-Korghai could take control of their hosts, alter their shape, and even drain prey from a distance. After a terrible war with the Rigellians of Rigel VII, who could not be influenced in this way, both races ended up decimated, leaving the Nioth-Korghai to rethink their approach and conceal themselves in the oceans of Karthis, known now as Rigel VI, in the Outer Rim.

But several covens broke off—banished by their people for having risked exposing their race or for wanting to feed without limits—and they travelled the galaxy on vessels concealed as asteroids or comets. One chiropteral variation bred from Erloors went to Terra I and Dathomir, from which came the Chirodactyls. Others went to the Urthha system, snatching ships passing between worlds until they were discovered and destroyed. The last of these came many centuries later to Urthha in its final days to join with the Wizard-King of Yoros, and there both lie in their tomb… or so it is said.

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[104] The Celegians had not all escaped unscathed, though this was not obvious at first. Those that had been infected gradually began to sour in disposition. Voices of madness poisoned their minds and darkened their hearts. Then, in secret, they followed the voices to Illathurion.

THE BLOOD SPITES OF TYTHON

Erstwhile Guardian of the Kingdom of the Ancients before he betrayed his loyalty to the Sephi by stealing the precious Diamond of Power, the Overlord of Sagar now allied with the Blood Spites and wicked Maldont of Gargolyn, triggering the clash of swords and dark magic across the formerly lush steppes of Tamboryon and turning it into a frozen wasteland after the Great City of Antika collapsed in ruin. Years of conflict would pass until the Gargoyles fled and the Overlord was defeated at the hands of a Chosen One called Blackstar (now remembered for the Wheelworld in that system).

Following this period, the Blood Spites, or Vampire Men as they were once called, were summoned to depart their mountain home for Tython to put to an end the Eruthros remnant once and for all. These had been taught formidable dark magics, but they could not long endure the sun lest they perish.

After escaping Drômenregn prior to the start of the Empyrean Wars, Houses Erl, Thon, Rath, and Sek established a new society under the Erl King and Thon Queen who settled upon Talss, home of the Snow People known as the Talz, who they would meet and befriend. As the High Clan of Thon was the largest of the clans to make the journey, and the first to feel the call to travel there, they renamed the planet Tython (though others argued that this was a lie and it had been named for Typhojem) and referred to all the people as Tythans collectively, so that there would be no further division between Houses, as they hoped to have left behind the vagaries of war for a hard but honest life. And so they built and tenanted Tython.

Unfortunately, the enemy of old had not forgotten them. Up from the volcanic Rift and through the black Chasm, which were connected through deep tunnels in the underworld by means of the Abyss of Ruh, an Infernal Gate had been constructed. It had taken long years and the efforts of undercover agents amongst the Tythans, but the moment an opening was rent, black and red smoke belched out, and the armies of darkness followed: carnivorous Rafa, mutant Jurgoran, and thirsty Blood Spites rushed out alongside acid spiders, hook hawks, and silik lizards.

They slaughtered the unprepared Tythans without mercy, staining the sands red with their blood so that it would ever after be known as the Red Desert. And in the wake of the Sith's crushing victory, a larger force was sent to take Baraka, renaming it Had Abaddon when they had, and other Deep Core worlds for their spiteful gods.

Notwithstanding, the then reigning Erl King and Thon Queen were not without their own powers, nor had the clans forgotten their resilience as they escaped and led away survivors of the initial onslaught, and it was their friendship with the Talz that enabled them to hide, subsist, and eventually strike back.[105]

So while the colonizers went to great pains to demolish the once-ravishing beauty of the City of Thon to erect the horrid city of Jurgoran upon it, the Tythans thrived in the wilderness and volcanic caves, becoming as smoke to the invaders. Long years passed. Seemingly little things were done in the interim, minor acts of sabotage and

[105] Not wishing to openly engage the Sith, the Talz departed their home through the gate to Alzoc III.

theft that would go unnoticed by the insular invaders or be chalked up to criminals. Eventually, a larger pattern would emerge. After the violent deaths of several prominent leaders, the Sith began to realize they were being targeted. Raiding parties were sent out to investigate and kill who or whatever was responsible; many never returned, and those that did reported on the world's fauna behaving more aggressively than usual. Despite their predicament, with the ongoing Cosmic War, there were no readily available reinforcements, and since it would be a loss of face to admit they needed help, the confounded Sith doubled their efforts to resolve the matter.

The Tythans, meanwhile, had grown back strong and in great numbers. When the time came to strike at their nemesis, none hesitated, and at the first light of dawn, they brought down the city gates. Fierce and uncompromising Tythans forces stormed Jurgoran alongside the various creatures they'd trained for this very moment—flame tygahs, manka cats, great guids, and royal raptors—tearing through the horranths and unprepared Sith guards. Several fled the city, only to be trampled by uxibeasts. Even the fearsome and wicked Rafa giants were slain that day.

The terrifying Blood Spites yet had a deadly aversion to the sun, and so they had earlier withdrawn to their pit. Following the Rout of Jurgoran, the Tythans descended into the Rift where the vampires and other creatures of the night dwelt. They had navigated parts of this pit in years past, having cut a crude staircase that spiraled down to a certain depth that ended at a roughly hewn platform. Some followed these. Others, affixed to ropes, dropped down precipitously. All were carrying torches and a bulging sack strapped around their bodies, from which they removed hand-sized objects that they affixed at varying intervals.

When they'd finished this, a signal was sounded, and the Tythans made a great clamor by means of handheld musical instruments some had brought for this very purpose. Awoken in a foul temper, the Blood Spites spread their wings and shot upwards to slaughter the impudent intruders. A torch was dropped, shining upon what appeared to be hundreds of the Vampire People swarming up!

One of the ancient gifts of the Eruthros, long forgotten by the Sith, was called *lightmaking*. This power had allowed them to channel the energy of the sun into crystals, which in olden times were used to power various devices and light up Drômenregn's magnificent cities. Tython grew several types of these crystals which the Tythans had earlier affixed to the Rift's walls while the Blood Spites yet slept.

Now, as mighty claws and fangs extended to tear apart their prey, the Tythans cast the enchantment of *lightmaking*, setting the crystals alight in a glorious explosion of heavenly luminance. Then they raced back up to the surface as the shrieks rent from dying throats and the stench of burning corpses grew overwhelming. The surviving Blood Spites went deep into hiding or returned to their mountains on Sagar through the underground portal in the Abyss of Ruh. The vampires would trouble them no longer.

Work began on a new city. Its enclaves utilized the sun-crystals to ensure that no creature of darkness would return under cover of night to disturb their realm. But never again would they inhabit Jurgoran, which ever after they referred to as the Old City. It remains a haunted city of evil deeds, and other things would come to dwell in the shadows there.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

SHADOW KINGDOMS

THE EVIL MUMMY AND THE KUMUMGAH CRUSADERS OF TATOOINE

Xanxathotep returned to Drômencas. The Overlord of Xanthiir and Caliph of dim Yumar, Xanxathotep was the Rafa offspring of the Witch-Queens and son of the gods, but because he was of Massare blood, he was met with great celebration by the Massassi. For the Kissai Priesthood, however, he held no love, and when he came before them, he did not bother to hide his disdain. These were not the Ninûsgidzida; for those, he held a modicum of respect, having been chosen by the Shadow Kings for great things. But *these!* Xanxathotep had seen and done things they couldn't fathom, and as the giant Massassi Overlord walked over to their pathetic thrones, he practically dripped with the Dark Side energies of the Anti-Force. "I am surprised to see the Kissai Priesthood still in power after your betrayal!"

"Ancient history, dear brother, you really must keep up with current affairs… But perhaps you'd been deprived of such extravagances while in hiding?" The other Kissai tittered amusedly at this gibe. They thought him a barbarian relic, a monster from a bygone age, and barely above a brute. He could sense their fear, disgust, and conceit. Xanxathotep was too powerful for their liking. Were it not for the Ssither who backed their arrangement, he would have taught the dissimulating Priesthood a lesson right there and tossed their severed heads to the cheering Massassi as he took the Sith homeworld for himself. But the Serpent People were powerful and buttressed by his unspeakable masters that ever watched from the threshold of the Outer Dark.

"My most recent task has been the subjugation of an Earthworld, which I have successfully accomplished, bringing about a terrible war in order to claim that world for the Immortal Gods of the Sith." The Kissai were silenced by that, and Xanxathothep smiled at the burning hatred he felt directed towards him.

"I see… In any case, the Shadow Council has a new assignment for you. There is a rogue player. If you can… *get rid* of him, over the Western Reaches you may establish your dominion as the *Sedriss!*" The title meant Supreme Malevolence, and would grant him power equal to that of the highest Archimages of Drômencas. Such accolades meant nothing to him, but for now he respected the chain of command and took the assignment, handpicking a battalion of Massassi to go with him to Hoth, a world said to be named for that unclean, protoplasmic Old One that yet dwelt in the dark.

Ere his departure, he warned the Priests: "For now, I go. But know this: no mere priest am I, but a demigod forged in the icy fires of Nephil! Should you require my services again, I will expect the appropriate oblations or *you will know my anger.*" The Kissai bowed in deference, but they were privately glad to see the back of him.

Xanxathotep traveled to the Temple of Shadows on Hoth, an ancient structure built by the goblinesque Fusks (later called Skels) who'd been made thralls of the Wind Walker. The King of the Wind Demons was not beloved of Lothan or Yamm'ka, for he was the son of Astor, whom they suspected sought to supplant them. The task they assigned Xanxathotep was intended to show dominance over that wayward rival.[106]

He'd intended to bide his time before making a move on the saturnine intelligence who roamed these boreal plains, but the rotting King of the Wind Spirits had known of his coming and made *his* presence felt first, dispatching the abominable Wampir to kill and feed on the terrified Massassi who served in the Temple of Shadows, forcing Xanxathotep to raise them up again as undead puppets. *No doubt, the Kissai plotted this*, Xanxathotep reasoned, *hoping to rid themselves of me. And if they succeed, the dark gods will only smile and nod their grim heads; such are their whims and loyalties.* Xanxathotep hated them all! All that mattered now was the increase of his own power. *One day, I will rule amongst the Ancient Ones—and then I will destroy them!*

"Fallen and forgotten spirit," he commanded, "you who once ruled empires, I have no quarrel with you. But I am now master of these lands! Go haunt another!" And in the hateful High Tongue, he cast *taralsiqsa*. Known by only a few, it was one of the rare spells that offered protection from entities of this ilk.

But out of a rising tempest, the Windagon replied, "Son and secret rival of the Iyrin, perhaps what you seek is nearer than you think…"

By these words, Xanxathotep understood that the Windagon was offering an alliance against the Ancient Ones. It was tempting, but in the end, it would only make him just another of Tulukhu's thralls, and if it was discovered before the Golden King could eliminate the Outer Gods, he would be hunted down and destroyed.

"I'm afraid not, Death-walker, for the stench of your kind does not suit me," he replied haughtily. "Perhaps when Vergama achieves his deicide, I will consider it."

"You will not live to see that day, Son of Sithlan, and there are none who will protect you!" So it was that the King of the Wind Spirits departed Hoth… but ever in the distance the caliph would hear his laughter and feel the icy chill of his hand.

It wasn't long afterwards that Xanxathotep was summoned by a young Kissai task force hiding in the jungles of Tunit (the old name of Fum Tatawin and Tatooine). Their battle against the Crusaders had not gone well, and they could not return to Drômencas and keep their lives; nor could they stay in the dread forest. One choice was left them. More often than not, summonings turned against the summoner, but they reasoned that they were not beckoning a sanity-shattering Shadow of Aetherius or even a Smoke Demon but merely a high-ranking Sith whom they had heard recently secured the Western Reaches. So, the task force waited to see if the Overlord of Xanthiir would heed their call. From their hastily constructed shrine made of the bones and blood of fallen comrades, black smoke emerged, plunging the cold night into a darkness deeper than sleep, concealing the sorrowful stars whirling in isolation far above.

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[106] While certain texts cite El'Shuddem as the Windagon's mother, that editorial emendation was an erroneous attempt to explain the Windagon's place amongst the Old Ones rather than the Outer Gods.

At long last, the terrible Xanxathotep, arrayed as one of the kings of old, stepped through the gate. He did not care for Tunit or the Kumumgah and would not otherwise have come were it not for the old stories, stories that told of a jewel of great value that had been stolen from emissaries of the Old Ones and hidden on these lands. Known as the Torc, it was said that any who wore it would be granted the power of the gods.

The Supreme Malevolence glared down at the pathetic, trembling band of failures that knelt before him expecting him to do what they could not. *The worthless fruit of the Kissai!* Seeing that they'd provided no sacrifice to him—for the Priesthood had instructed the people to offer tribute to none but the Immortal Gods, Potentates, and Ninûsgidzida—his eyes blazed with a violent red flame, and in the High Tongue he hissed a vile enchantment. With his burning sword alit and raised, the giant stormed against the startled Sith, stabbing, slicing, and goring them with controlled ferocity.

Less than half of the task force survived his initial onslaught, but Xanxathotep's wrath was not easily sated, and as they escaped into the jungles, he pursued, feeding on their fear and suffering. Of these, another half were hunted down and slaughtered.

Five now remained, and in that murky, foreboding forest, they watched from afar as the Supreme Malevolence performed some kind of incantation over the corpses of their fallen comrades. A hideous viridian light flared awake in what were once eyes. Then the deadly regiment of the puppeted-dead stood up and shuffled into formation.

As if devils themselves flew at their backs, the survivors flew as rapidly as their legs could take them to the one place they might find refuge, the one place they yet could find in that dismal, wooded nocturne—the strange and awe-inspiring city of Kumma.

Kumma, which they'd dreaded; its mountainous walls and massive pillars that seemed grown from the earth itself, unchiseled by mortal hands…

Kumma, whose unyielding and massive stone faces stared down at them, penetrating their souls with terrifying thoughts that said: *Shame to the Children of the Firstborn whose spirits await torment in the Outer Darkness…*

Kumma, the impenetrable city of noble crusaders, who with every victory put lie to the noxious philosophies of the Serpent Lords and their cruel masters…

Kumma, the city that would likely be their doom.

Redolent with the ancient *luha* trees, the winds rolled gently down the venerable hills upon the terrified fugitives, guided by ghastly Ghomrassen above. So different were these lands from the harsh and angry motherland where they'd been shaped into harsh and angry warriors. Making their way to the sandstone gates past the acroteria sculpted with the fanciful bas-reliefs of winged figures, the escapees threw down their weapons. Before the gargantuan columns ringed around the portal that pivoted open to allow the advance of armed guards, they collapsed to their knees, babbling and pleading incessantly in their ugly tongue. With evident signs of panic and exhaustion on their torn clothes and bloodstained faces, the guards called for the Paladins.

What a pitiful sight on so beautiful a night, thought Berckinn Arewn, eldest of the Kumumgah Paladins, seeing the prostrate figures before them. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded. "Why hast the oppressor come here in terror and tears?"

Finally, one composed himself enough to explain in the common tongue of Universal, which the Kumumgah understood. "Have pity on us!" the red-skinned Sith began. "We now place ourselves at your great mercy—even if that mercy means death—for a far worse fate awaits us at the hands of the Supreme Malevolence, whom we had foolishly summoned, for at this very moment he is hunting us, and soon he will emerge from the jungle!"

"If you summoned him as you say, why then does he hunt his allies and not his adversaries?"

The alacrity of their response underlied the verity of their fears. "It is true that we were sent for the express purpose of conquering the Kumumgah and usurping the Tunit throne for the Sith Empire," another warrior said. "Yet, your people proved stronger and braver than we'd anticipated, and so we called to *him*. But at the moment of his arrival, he began to slaughter us. And yet that is not the worst of it, for anon he began turning us into the horrible *dead-that-live*."

Arewn pondered this a moment. "Why should the undead frighten you? You who traffic in the darkness of demons and vile gods?"

The young Kissai replied, "It is said to be perpetual torment, of a derangement and pain beyond imagining… Better to die and awaken in the halls of our fathers…"

"I would learn more of these matters," the Paladin said. "See to it they are securely chained and bereft of any hidden weapons or appurtenances."

The Kumumgah proved as wise as their reputations, sealing their gates and alerting the giant sentinels to warn them of the enemy's approach. A phalanx of Crusaders took the rueful Sith to a fortified prison, for war had changed Kumma so that it now housed such places, but not to the degree that its people failed to provide food and clean bedding. While this was occurring, the Paladin repurposed a three-ton sarcophagus known as the Tumulus and assembled a volunteer force to protect the Necklace of Command called the Torc. Ere long, Kumma's sentinels echoed in their resonant voices the following warning: *The Overlord of Xanthiir has arrived.*

It had taken some effort, for Xanxathotep knew this was an accursed city to his people, but a simple invultuation managed to afford him a secret passage, and he entered just as the Crusaders were scrambling to protect the Torc. *Fools! For this reason alone have I come!* As if from a shattered dam, Xanxathotep surged towards the hiding place of his prize, implacable, slashing any and all in his path. Crusaders managed to remain several feet ahead of him, battling him and his animate-dead army until, finally, the Supreme Malevolence smashed into the chamber that held the Torc. Wasting no time, with the Kumumgah looking on in horror, he opened the sarcophagus and placed the prized jewel upon his neck.

"Not for lesser beings were you meant," he said to the precious artifact. "Now I take my place in the Eternal Pantheon!"

The cold winds of Yumar blew through the chamber. The death-chill of Nifhel breathed its unholy breath. A distant echo of laughter rose from the Temple of Shadows. *Something was wrong!* Before Xanxathotep could move, a desiccated, rotting hand reached out, and, just for a moment, the unspeakable form of an emaci-

ated, ancient god appeared before him, his empty sockets lit with an unholy, spectral gleam. It towered over the Supreme Malevolence. "Now we will see who is fallen and forgotten!" the grinning skull said before vanishing.

Xanxathotep stood as one stricken. The Torc had severed the Supreme Malevolence from his powers. The story of the Necklace of Command had been a ruse established long before by the Conclave of the Firstborn, once of several, to ensnare enemies who might come looking for a source of power that they believed the artifact would grant.

The Crusaders sprang into action. Xanxathotep was forced to rely on his brute strength, which was yet formidable—and not a few of the Crusaders were brought down that day—but the Malevolent One was overcome and forced into the Tumulus, which upon closing, instantly mummified him. Distant laughter could be heard, chilling the Kumumgah to their core while hardening their resolve against evil.

The Sith prisoners had felt the Malevolent One's rage and fear, and they wept in relief knowing he could no longer harm them.

"Did you not understand before that suffering, war, and death is all that the darkness portends?" Arewn asked when he arrived to inform them of the news. "That you are nothing to your masters but a way for them to maintain and expand their power?"

"We have begged mercy from you, the great Crusaders, and you have granted that. It is more than we deserve. Our lives are in your hands to do with as you will."

"That does not answer my question," Arewn replied.

"Had we been taught by such noble ones as yourselves instead of dour and harsh barons, our lives… or choices may have been different. We were trained from the time we were but boys to believe that your kind were foolish and evil. We did not know… We heard talk of things such as mercy and kindness, but our masters said that they were weakness and hypocrisy. But *I felt it* when first we came here and met in battle… it was as sweet water to a parched land. I should have thrown down my weapons then and asked for mercy then. Now, it is too late to save us."

"It is not…" Arewn said, "for mercy is not miserly, and what you've said fills me with great sorrow but even greater hope. Let us speak further."

Arewn sent a message to Drômencas: "Xanxathotep and your invaders are no more. Return to Tunit again, and the same fate will be visited upon Drômencas." For their part, the Kissai considered the elimination of the Supreme Malevolence a fair bargain and were content to leave Tunit to others who held a more potent grudge.

In a year's time, with gladdened hearts, four of the five Sith were no longer Sith but a vital part of the Kumumgah community.

WIZARDS OF WAR

Gladiator games, blood sports, gambling dens, and flesh emporiums had come to mar the galaxy at this time. With the Shadow Council—guided by the Shadow Kings and the psychopathic sultans of Illathurion—establishing elaborate pleasure grounds where vices and other saturnalia might spread to pollute the hearts and souls of the galactic citizens, a widespread culture of decadence and decay was engendered.

As some of the more famous pleasure grounds were the Monster Mazes of Wor Tandell created by Din Grrut, Nemonides D'krith, and Dakara Ramises, this led to their appellation as the Wizards of Wor. In these arenas, armed prisoners would be promised freedom and treasure if they could successfully escape without being killed by the predators bred to do just that: starved Sharptooths, violent Ssi-ruu, irascible Thorwor, and, most dangerous of all, the fearsome, winged Ecothom called Worluks.

Through phase technology, some of these adversaries were even rendered invisible until the moment of confrontation. Successful warriors were also pitted against each other as the crowds bet and cheered on their favorite "worlords," as they called participants. And the desire of spectators to be active participants grew to such a degree that customers were allowed to sign a waiver and fight in the arena for prizes. To add to the excitement, the Wizards of Wor Tandell sometimes entered their own mazes to fry them with *Force-lightning*!

Not one to be outdone, Zelashiel built the city-sized Dungeon of Excity on his homeworld of Malachor V. In one arena, slaves armed with a bow and ample arrows were tasked to steal a precious bauble from each of the treasure chambers without getting butchered by the various Rozzum he kept: reanimated skeletons, rampaging Abyssin, terrifying Danchaf, Trollsbane, and deadly Reels spawned in the festering maze and gore-soaked dungeons. Zelashiel was not without a sense of humor, for if the venturer took too long, those Writhing Horrors nicknamed Monoliths would come to devour them! This too became a pay-for-play sport, though an often deadly one.

On the moon of Oricon, which had once orbited Alar, Nyarhepdreh populated his city-wide compound with Bothrium Beasts and other abominations of Illathurion. Unlike the Dungeons of Excity and Wor, however, there was no distinction between spectators and players. All who came to Netherworld on Oricon had to survive the horrors that dwelt there or die trying. Winners were given riches, but they were few and far between, for the "game" was but a high-stakes trap designed to lure players to train and feed the Crimson King's Rozzum army. Some even became part of that army when they were brought back to unholy, unnatural life.

These proved to be but the first of such playground worlds. This was the time of the rising plutocrat, and those who profited from war lived lives of bizarre excess. On places like the Hunter's Moon (aka. the moon of Zon), Kashi, Blackguard, and other private reserves scattered throughout the galaxy, the Wild Hunt became a legendary escape for the wealthy sadist and corporate ghoul to bet upon as they watched abducted members of the lower classes get hunted down. Gladiatorial matches became popular the galaxy over, with the Gamma Games amongst the first to broadcast across entire sectors. On the worlds of Tay'to (later known as Taypho), Sagar, Kon'Ami (later Bal'demnic), and Nam'coh (later Nam'ta), vast and various obstacle courses were designed for those who would risk much for wealth or prestige by fighting against robots or a rogue's gallery of aliens armed with laser cannons in various obstacle courses, mazes, and lairs.

Some of these concepts came to be employed as forms of punishment, as was the case for the Remulakians. On the eve of every Zerl, in which their planet's three

moons aligned, criminals were forced to fight the dangerous Garthok before a mass of excited spectators. But one Remulakian managed to defeat the creature using the skills he'd learned from his time spent on Urthha, and his victory—as he announced that fateful day—was not for him alone but for the people forced to live under the tyranny of political and environmental degradation. This marked the start of a movement for the freedom fighters of that world who demanded freedom and change.

To their frustration, the government called in armed forces to suppress the "terrorists." In response, the protesters took another path—if they could not defeat the wicked slaves of power, they would leave them to their "victory" and start anew on another world. They came to Cerea. A Council of Elders was appointed who shunned advanced technology and strove to preserve the forests, mountains, rivers, oceans, and plains. They even invited Ithorians to help them live in balance with the natural world. The polluted planet they'd left behind fell to misery and woe until it collapsed entirely, leaving only those now known as Cereans as the viable remnant of that race.

It was a rare triumph at a time that saw much defeat.

The last of those who came to be called the Wizards of Wor was Sokratu the Elder. A notable astrologer, astronomer, and infamous Neo-Plaristite who stole and perverted the philosophies of Plaristes, Sokratu was popular in his day, regularly hosting fetes that saw attendance by the galaxy's movers-and-shakers. On Rimk, his towering fortress, Rimkas Tuwan, had been built to withstand the ages; aeons hence, it would serve as headquarters for Palpatine's secret apprentice, Alkin Neret, Dark Lady of the Sith. But it was beneath that Dark Tower that Sokratu's more interesting hobbies were housed, and frequently did he descend the long, candle-lit stairway to visit with those chained within one of several subterranean caverns, the half-starved, half-crazed victims that he used to better understand the science behind the metaphysical legerdemain. With the acquisition of Erleg Litchem, who had had the great fortune of being infected by one of the Derriphan, Sokratu began a new study of life-extension. His success would give rise to the wicked cantraip of *ukûbokum (eternal hatred)* and the first of the deathly Ankath that were commonly known as the Lich Kings.

Ever was Sokratu careful not to invoke the great powers beyond the door, for he saw them as capricious and just as likely to destroy him as not. Also, he'd uncovered the Parchments of Pnom, first recorded by the Pan-preneur, and knew the travails of the pre-Eibonites who'd meddled in these matters. So he kept to the more common entities that had come to haunt the desolate corners of the galaxy. He learned of the vicious Space Wraiths and the strange Shadow Demons, which are a type of Shadow Being, and the ways in which they could take possession of the Sith, driving them to an orgy of mad violence. It was to examine this very phenomenon and overcome it that he'd first begun work on another interesting captive—his own father, Nyarhepdreh.

Nyarhepdreh was called the Crimson King after his tyrannical mother, the Red Queen, returned to the Great Black Nest. A descendent of House Zuguruk, he was known as the Keeper of Secrets, for it was said he held knowledge that even the Ssither had not obtained. Nor would he share those secrets with his rightful heir.

But Sokratu was persistent and crafty. He had arranged the death of Nyarhepdreh's true heir and disappearance of his mother, the Crimson Queen, leaving him, Sokratu, the bastard son of his father, as the only possible heir. It may be that that was why Nyarhepdreh would not pass on his jealously guarded secrets. It mattered not. What he could not get by virtue of filial responsibility he would get by virtue of torment, and from the imprisoned king, he learned the incantation of *itsusiqsa* that could bind spirits to statues and temples. Done properly, the seeker's spirit would be bound to the loci of a temple or inanimate phylactery (designed aforehand with eldritch geometry focused to a nexus upon which the spirit is suspended and imprinted). Done improperly, the spirit would be utterly destroyed.

But that was just the tip of the spear. At the conclusion of his ultimate experiment, Sokratu grinned broadly. "You are fortunate, father," he seemed to speak to the corpse of the man who'd died in the process, but he knew his father yet lived. "Your subsequent reemergence as a dark spirit is a triumph!"

"Set me free!" Nyarhepdreh commanded furiously. "Or kill me!"

"I don't think I will," Sokratu replied. "I prefer you better as my captive."

Eventually, even that grew old, and he embedded the raging spirit of Nyarhepdreh to an obelisk that revealed and opened the doors to the library-temple Sokratu had built on Krayiss II. For uncounted millennia, his father served as a sentinel, going on to capture the spirits of four Jedi in 4000 BBY. Most of the time, however, he employed another of his well-guarded secrets, one that his son had not pried from him, and Nyarhepdreh walked in Dream, ruling still as the terrifying and resolute Crimson King.

Meanwhile, the star of Sokratu grew, and he came to be known as the Philosopher-King of Rimk. His philosophies and discoveries went on to inform the Sith for millennia, spurring on those from Darth Dreadwar to Darth Ruin and Darth Millennial.[107]

But for the Wizards of Wor, their time for games was at an end, for they were to prepare in fasting and self-mortification the application of certain severe mantic formulae ere the arrival of the escort who would take them through the Infernal Portal to their apotheosis. Of their successors, many of the top candidates stood up for inclusion in this greatest of Sith ranks, but only the highest of the elites would be permitted to take the trials in the Synagogue of the Serpent. Erected across several worlds, few survived the bizarre, pyramidal-shaped temples of torment, but those who did were deemed worthy to follow in the footsteps of the Ninûsgidzida by the Lords of the Shadow Council. As to the pleasure grounds, they left in charge certain well-trained underlings to take over. They were called the Priests of the Game. They expanded the games as far as Babylon XIII on the edge of the Outer Rim, where they established tournaments under the guise of a religion that venerated chance. So their Green Deacons gathered tithes and their masked Jade Faces tested worthy champions, all ensuring the excitement they provided had an added addictive quality as well.

[107] Though cagey about his background, encouraging rumours that he was little more than a Human mutant, Darth Millennial descended from the three-eyed Traskan witches from the Unknown Regions.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

BROKEN COVENANTS

GATHERING OF THE GREEN

As the gloaming of the Charnel Worlds disgorged across the mournful stars, suffusing the galaxy in sanguinary conflict, suffering, and death, the Firstborn Neti grew despondent. The tall treelike beings, garlanded in verdigris, now bowed their crowned and magnificent heads to whisper conspiracies.

They would have understood the raping of the megacosm by the Enemy, for such was the way of the monstrous, but time and again, they found that it was Humans and near-Humans on *both sides* who wracked the land and murdered its occupants, often in casual disregard. And in their righteous indignation, they became myopic, overlooking the good for the evil that men did in the name of progress. It was difficult to parse the former when the delicate and beautiful ecosystems that had taken centuries to grow were torn down as a matter of course by Man's machines which roared, whizzed, and plowed through the burrows and hideaways of rare, elusive, and gentle beasts who could not escape the destruction in time, with thousands upon thousands of exotic and fragile plants, insects, and birds ripped apart or poisoned by the apathy of those unable to see anything but their own self-interests.

Following the attack on Revyia, Neti Wizards joined with the Asogian offspring races of the Ithorians and Octusi to help protect threatened worlds and form an assembly of likeminded botanical races led by Prince Igdrasil, Sovereign of the Neti. Called the Gathering of the Green, the assembly included the Ho'Din, Ergesh, M'shinn, Arool, Patitite, Daltarri, Zeffliffl, Bafforr, Pliith, Vesuvague, Saboten, Affytechan, Yarin, Murakami, Agarian, Zongorlu, Delvian, Sylphe, Aganof, Rotian (Bouncers), Lutonite, Supox, Zelosian, and Mazon (a splinter group of Zelosians).

After a time, several saw their attempts as half-measures—e.g., educating the Humans only mitigated the activities of a few—and deemed that stronger tactics were necessary to really do something about the problem. Though they brought in support from insectoid and other non-botanical races such as the Arbrans, many would not align with Gathering, believing it would only make things worse. So, hoping to win greater support if the Asogians backed them, Prince Igdrasil now approached them.

The peace-loving race declined, intuiting that their proposed censures could potentially lead to violence and that discriminatory policies would only take away from their primary mission of growing plants for food and medicine on hard-hit worlds. The Hepsalum Tash, an Asogian offspring race, also chose to maintain their irenic stance while promoting life in all its variations on their homeworld of Dagobah. Nor would the Alzerki, an affable plant-race with felinoid aspects, take part. And although the assembly was headed by powerful Neti Wizards, the majority of the Neti also would not join, though they admired their aims, hoping they might bring about some good.

Lastly, on the forested planet of Monastery, the leaders of the Beast Races—shaped in the form of animals—were approached. When they politely declined, Prince Igdrasil complained from the seat of honor given him in the Circle of Being. "This is beyond our comprehension. We are Protectors of the Green. You are Protectors of the Red. Over the course of their existence, Humans have massacred beyond trillions of your kin. How can you turn down a chance for justice?"

"It would not be justice but retaliation and revenge, which is prohibited," declared Elah Rairah, a large hare and one of the great Kings of the Beast Races. "As we understand it, violence is solely reserved for self-defense, and, after the Grieving and Darkening which saw the galaxy changed, for the procurement of food."

"It is not violence we *intend* but censure."

"We do not judge your intent," said the stately Ellil, Lord of the Winged Ones, "but what *will* come to pass, or perhaps you do not see as far as our kind sees and how the trail leads from one to the other?"

"I *see* the obligation of our course. In the face of genocide, is violence not a necessary form of self-defense?"

"Are you suggesting that the decree of the Maker is to be circumvented?" challenged Rex, the Canid King, who was a great tawny Pherro with a mastiff head.

"The Prophecy of Restoration ensures that our slaughtered brethren will live again," bayed Sabbra, the Canid Queen, who had a long, skinny face and black-and-white coat. "At *that* time, when the Swoophawk soars again and the Worluks are cast down, will we see justice for all that Man has done."

"Does not the Supreme Maker help those who help themselves?" Prince Igdrasil said slyly, failing to realize that they were not as easily swayed by clever words.

The being that arose from their assembly was oddly graceful but somewhat startling. Centauriform in nature, she was tall and ancient, horned and hooved, and beautiful, with long midnight hair that nearly reached her feet. "You err if you think the Humans are of one type," spoke High Queen Beudag. "Many have I encountered in my long years since they drove us from our homes with iron and steel; yet many fed and sheltered us, risking great danger to themselves. Though the wise races have learned to shun the Enemy, the majority of Mankind do not know what they do. As the Darkening saw the beasts reduced to the same paradigm as those of the Ancient World—the arcadia from whence our kind were taken and given a new lease—so too do the Humans continue under the powerful indoctrination of their forebears. But we cannot peer into their hearts, and it is only their actions that reveal who is a Protector of Life and who is a Purveyor of Death. *Your* way would have us condemn and bring slaughter to both… and so must we decline and urge you to alter your course."

"We only seek to *reason* with them…" Prince Igdrasil stated finally.

"And if they are not reasonable?"

But he had no answer for that, and they knew what that meant.

Beaudag the Centauress declared the Meeting of the Circle of Being concluded. The kings and queens of the Beast Races and all the Protectors of the Red departed, leaving the prince feeling resentful and shamed. "So does flesh look out for flesh…" he said to his fellow Neti, "leaving the Green to look out for itself!"

The Gathering of the Green took care drafting a measure to be presented to the Conclave of the Firstborn. Entitled "The Case Against Mankind," it began by reiterating the warnings that the Celestials had given earlier in regard to Humans, followed by a record of all the Terran colonies known to have fought on the side of the Enemy and, most damning of all, the places in which Humans had brought ruin to the natural world. Grievance was also claimed against them for their role in the war—most egregiously, their genocidal actions against the Taung, the destruction of the great cities of Alashan, and the various calamities brought on by the Alterrans. To counter this downward spiral and send a strong and concise message, the document recommended that all Allied Races immediately cease interactions with the Human race, including trade and fellowship, and that all interbreeding with them should be strictly prohibited, as this only reinforced the Human ethos. Near-Humans had to choose a side or be shunned alongside them.

The document was careful to state that although it was understood that not all Humans engaged in violence, speciesism, and cruelty, there did appear to be inherent character flaws in their makeup and culture which were spreading through the galaxy. As galactic pariahs, they might reconsider their actions and behave better. Thus, strong measures were necessary until they were aware of the harm they caused, expressed penitence, and altered their ways.

The Conclave of the Firstborn deliberated long on this requisition and admitted that they saw some wisdom in it, but in the end, it was decided that they would not enact it. When the Gathering of the Green challenged them as to their reasons why, they explained: "Several Human factions are deep in battle against the agents of the Old Ones, and many have died in service to the Allied Races. We would not dishonor their sacrifice. Although imperfect, ill-mannered, and often ill-informed, they could also be steadfast, compassionate, and resourceful. The wise see all sides…"

"What virtues you see are but exceptions to the rule," Prince Igdrasil intoned. "Selfish is their nature, fortified by violence, which they will express on one another and the other inhabitants of their worlds if they do not have an enemy to fight."

"As nature grows, so too might the Humans with better examples. Many have taken shelter with the Sephi, Kumumgah, Ahra Naffi, Essulines, Sullustans, Jerni, Muur, Yarnoans, and others, who might very well ennoble these refugees. I would not have them turn away those they'd welcomed. It is not time to risk alienating friends. When the Allied Races have won, we can more carefully consider Humanity's place in the galaxy and see to their reeducation. Do not be disheartened. Even though the Council will take no position at this time, we will not stop the Gathering from adopting these measures for yourselves."

Although disappointed, they considered matters and proceeded to disperse "The Case Against Mankind" to the shores of many, and not a few agreed with its message. This would go on to have far-reaching, negative consequences, however, when Human hybrids came to be looked down upon with hate, revulsion, and illegality in some sectors. Those identified by superficial facial markings were discriminated

against and called pejorative terms such as "Abhumans," "Ongar," and "mongrels."[108] And so some of the near-Humans, anxious to have the next generation escape this stigma, sought out baseline Humans with which to mate so that their offspring might lose the physical characteristics that branded them as different.

Yet, embroiled as the galaxy was in war, most weren't paying much attention to the issue of Human behavior in the galaxy, and the Gathering of the Green did not get what it wanted. With the passage of time, Prince Igdrasil grew ever more dissatisfied. Botanical races were, by nature, patient and accustomed to the slow windings of the plant-world, but it seemed as if their efforts would never pay off, and Humans continued despoiling nearly everywhere they went.

Frustrated, they grimly determined that for Human encroachment to end, it was time to take drastic measures, and the Gathering came to Alashan to make their case. The Alashanians harbored a deep and abiding resentment for Humans, and they were persuaded to action. A troop of S'kytri, then visiting as ambassadors, got wind of this and begged the Alashanian High Council not to pursue a rash course, arguing that it would make them just as guilty as the Paxians had been—worse even, for it would take the lives of the innocent who had nothing to do with what their ancestors had done. While acknowledging the truth of the S'kytri's words, they would not be deterred.

From within their subterranean cities built to withstand a supernova blast rose the long sinewy head of their protector. Amon Lith was not of the Osiarch or Valdilar, but it was upon his ancient ideas that the Osiarch had designed Skyriver… He was the Guardian of Forever… and he was no admirer of Mankind. His target was Pax's new capital, then known as Cormond, which housed their Star Temple and Infinity Gate, and he was ever so precise.

As with the destruction of Alashan, there would be no warning. Amon Lith roared, and a bright ray of all-consuming death burst forth from the entity's mouth. There was a flash and a silent expulsion of energy—and just like that, millions of people melted like their capital city into glass. More would suffer in the aftermath of his electric funeral, including the ruling elite, military infrastructure, and all those who lived in the legislative district. Canyons took the place of city squares, and stygian clouds again darkened once-blue skies. Alashan had taken its vengeance…

Though a few of the Elder Races called it justice, many more called it genocide, castigating the Alashanians and expelling them from the Conclave of the Firstborn. In the face of condemnation and shame, the people of Alashan turned inwards.

Pax's survivors wondered if they'd been punished by aliens or deities or if the planet itself had turned on them, and even when they heard the reasons for Alashan's retribution, what had been done to Alashan was far in the past and long forgotten; not even preserved in their history texts, and it was only from these that they'd heard of the Taung as a savage race that once shared their planet and then left without a trace. Without interstellar gates, their questions and sorrows remained on their world. Their diaspora had come to its end, and for long years, they would look to the stars in wonder or fear and think of the hubris of mortals and the wrath of the gods…

[108] Abhumans later referred to the dark side inhabitants of Despora.

Some of the Firstborn felt sympathy for the people of Pax. The Gree brought them food and supplies while the Yma, an offspring race of the Pan-Preneur, helped to rebuild their infrastructure and manage biosphere-recovery projects that would allow the world to thrive for a while longer. Other alien races brought friendship and news of the outside. It is said that these acts prevented xenophobia from taking hold on Paxian minds and hearts, as it was non-Humans who helped them rise from the ashes.

Across the stars, initial reactions from Humans who heard of the events ranged from fear, anger, and grief. The Gathering were pleased. *At last, Mankind will learn!* They even looked forward to welcoming Humans back into the fold as galactic brethren. Yet, after an initial period of mourning in which many tears were shed and words of sympathy spoken, the majority simply carried on as if nothing had happened. The Neti Wizards were taken aback! Had such a thing occurred to any of the Elder Races, they'd have sought ways to make fundamental changes in themselves and their societies.

The Gathering gathered. Humans could not improve, they concluded, determining then that the Taung and others had been right: Mankind was a pestilence that had to be eradicated before they came to afflict all the worlds!

Anxiety and anger poisoned the roots, stems, and leaves of the Gathering, turning once-peaceful plant and fungi races into instruments of destruction. On their respective worlds, these awaited the signal: Deneba bushes, Oasis mothers, Pliith, Daltarri, Tentacle Cacti, Drengir, Dart Flowers, Uranian Plants, Swamp Beasts, Yarin Berserkers, Triffids, Otik[109], Mutores, Mobilis Strangulatum[110], Agarians, Dekamites, Replicator Plants, Electric Sagebrushes, Chlorophon, Monster Minds, Urusheol[111], Verdendrians, and the Gourd-Headed Ones aligned with the Demon of Vengeance.

When the signal came, they began on a march to death! Creeping, crawling, some crossed gates; some infiltrated Human settlements across the galaxy; they unleashed terror on hundreds of worlds. Tens of thousands of Humans and near-Humans deemed guilty of crimes against nature were targeted and attacked in the Scourge of Man.

Things would have gone far worse had not one of the plant-people, who'd earlier befriended several Humans, deemed the massacre a step too far. He informed Lady Illia Amm, one of the Primeval of the Neti, of the plot. Lady Amm wasted no time contacting their allies in the Conclave of the Firstborn and Galactic Federation of Worlds, who set out to stop the mass murdering plant creatures.

Some were killed when they would not be stopped, and some fled to Garden of the Lorelei in Illathurion, though the Agarians and others swore vengeance upon whomever had betrayed them. Lady Illia Amm and the Primeval would not punish the offspring of other races, but they would deal with their own. So they gathered on Aleen in the Mid Rim to confront the Neti leaders of the Gathering of the Green who had gone into hiding there.

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[109] Han Solo and Chewbacca delivered and rescued a group of Otik on Shinbone. As the Yarin and several of these botanical races were found to be peaceful, it may be that the Gathering's leaders were the sole reason for the violent disposition they adopted during this period.

[110] An invasive weed bioengineered by the Sith to kill any surviving Asmerukii and all who resemble them.

[111] Necropolis Plants, known for a pernicious poison that drives its victims to madness and the grave.

"Where is Prince Igdrasil?" she demanded.

"We do not track the comings and goings of our monarch," replied Shepherd Thyne.

"None of the Primeval are above the law," Illia Amm stated, "not even the Prince, who I fear has gone the way of Thagordenia."

"The *only* law the Gathering of the Green follows is the Law of the Green," Thyne replied haughtily.

Incensed by his impertinence, she declared, "The Green lies within the Circle of the World, having emanated from the Circle of the Spirit. The Humans that you so despise and attempted to wipe out are part of the Circle of the Flesh, which also share the Circle of the World and emanate from the same source."

"They spill the blood of Red and Green," defended Thyne. "Like any blight, they *must* be eradicated."

"*That* is not our commission, and by spilling their blood, you have become the very thing that you despise." With a signal of her boughs, Illia Amm and the Primeval encircled the treacherous Neti Wizards inside a wide net made up of the conjoined branches and roots of her fellow elders.

"Who will defend and protect our people from the slow destruction Mankind will bring?" wailed Shepherd Thyne, downcast not by their actions but by the fact that

they'd been so grievously misunderstood by their own family, and wondering, with a creeping, gnawing doubt, that perhaps they *had* taken things too far.

"You protected *nothing*! You took the easy path and became destroyers!"

"And so will you now destroy us in turn?" Thyne lamented.

"Destruction is not our intent," Amm stated gravely as the Primeval called upon the power of Aleen. "But there must be consequences." The ground seemed to buck and revolt as geothermal energy surged through the earth and into the Gathering's conspirators. And as their bark withered and turned a grisly pitch, they cried out in remorse and pain. When, at last, their punishment was complete, they found out that not only had their powers been removed, but they'd been swallowed into a chasm deep in the hollow of Aleen. "So that you do not escape, your nature has been altered so that the air outside is as a poison to you. Here, in this underworld, the air is filtered by the abundant root system of the ancient arbozoic trees to an atmosphere suitable to your needs. A Great Seal will be placed above the entrance. Along with the trees, it will be guarded by this world's natives, the Aleena, whom I have consulted with. They call you the *Kindalo*, a word that in their tongue means kindling."

But out of thin air, a mysterious entity in the shape of a plant-person appeared: "I am Orphne, a fellow servant of the Sacred Way," she said. Recognizing the authority of the ancient Earth Elemental (whom the Aleena called Sollux), Lady Amm and the Primeval nodded their trunks in respect. "I have come to aid you in this matter, for left in this state, it will not be long before they wither and die of grief."

"Why would the fate of fallen Neti matter to you?" Lady Amm asked. "We are not Dusk Diggers or of the race of Great Worms that your kind oversees."

"What do you know of my kind or what I oversee?" she replied before adding with an odd glint. "I would see the Dark Neti be comforted in their exile."

The days passed and the Kindalo grew discontent and despairing. As their mood soured, they sought to discover a means of summoning those that might help them; but in this they were thwarted, for Orphne took up part-time residence in the underworld to help rehabilitate them. "You are in a doleful place," she said before chuckling in her strange way, "but you are not beyond hope for redemption. I will help you learn to live in the fragile balance."

"What is it to you, strange one?" the one formerly called Thyne, now known as Bent Vine, asked. "For you are more than you say or appear to be."

"*My* affairs are no concern of yours, as *yours* are none of mine, however, I know *why* you did what you did, even if you went about it in a foolish way. The battle between the oppressor and the oppressed will not resolve any time soon, for the Eldritch Powers and those who follow their ways are e'er looking to ignite such flames from the shadows where few discern the perpetual turning of the Circle of the Serpents… order and chaos… in this cycle are the masses kept in bondage!"

Why she had come to provide them succor they never understood, and she never said; all they knew was that she'd taken interest in their plight. But one clue she dropped. "The ultimate battle is coming, long from now, and a side you must choose: To steward life… or to hinder, harm, and stamp it out!"

THE HORROR THAT CAME TO YAVIN 4

The sun was eclipsed on the day Mhu'anThul arrived on Drômencas to escort the Ninûsgidzida, who were the Shadow Council, into the Charnel Worlds, for the black stars had aligned for them. They now moved without uncertainty through the gate as willing vessels for those monstrous spirits they'd embraced as their Immortal Gods.

Third son of Typhojem, Mhu'anThul contorted the mechanism of succession on Drômencas in order to transform two would-be successors into energy-beings that would follow his every command. He had learned this from a powerful Pyrdrakon called the Nemesis of Flame. In this way had Lord Azgath Ondur become the Dreadful Entity and Lord Nihl Rahaphtor become the Hateful Entity. And on Belsavis he spawned his own abomination. Clothed in the skin and entrails of a thousand sacrifices, GeThul was forged from the genetic material of Rakatan, Rathtar, Vodranite, Grizmallt, and others. Yet unlike his progenitors, Gethul was dedicated to his great grandmother and venerated the idol of Eternal Grace. Thus, he was sent to Makeb to rule the Humans there as a god, though this forced the Kabieroun to flee to the Outer Rim to worlds they christened Kabaira and Kabeiroun.

Ere his return, Mhu'anThul was summoned by the Zanibar from their temples to deal with the troubles they were having in the Gordian Reach.

Very few of the Precursors or their offspring were left without stain, but those that were became a subject of great curiosity to the Old Ones. One such race was the Javan of Yahven 4, as that world was then called, and to it Typhojem had sent the Zanibar. But the reptilian natives could not be killed—having never succumbed to the Architects or Ancient Ones—though they *could* be forced into slavery under the threat of harm to the offspring races of the Javan which populated the Greater Javin region, such as the Lutrillians, Ugnaughts, Mugaari, Morodin, Oku, Fusk, Tramnians, and others who were yet under attack from the Zanibar and crystalline Gutretee warriors that had been corrupted by the darkness.[112]

Fierce though their adversaries were, the offspring of the Javan fought on, winning engagement after engagement, bolstered by the fact that their parent race could not be felled, a fact that exposed the ultimate weakness and failure of the Enemy. To counter this dangerous trend, Mhu'anThul drew forth Cxax un Ukluth.

Cold Danda Sine had briefly kept it in Aenir until it became a nuisance, Cxax un Ukluth (called *Kiax* and *Ivax* in Tanaic and later High Corellian, from *Kasa Yada* in Ap'iru) was a monstrous, enigmatic, ethereous nebulae, and the son of the Father of Shadows. Gravid with the black spirits of the damned and sent to Yugami, until he split itself into male and female aspects in order to rebirth that host of horrors known as the Old Ones including the Ghizguth of Cykranosh, who is known as Hērsum.

Cxax un Ukluth would not cease gnawing, harrowing, and polluting until the entire region and all of its inhabitants had curdled and died. Once again the Enemy was thwarted, for the Celestials had heard the call of the Javan and snuffed that being out. Its gaseous remains yet fester and stain the region to this day.

[112] The Fusk who chose to migrate established Melmac. Those who stayed on Hoth were called Skels.

With Cxax un Ukluth smote upon the celestial seas, Mhu'anThul tasked the Zanibar to channel those dying but yet crackling energies into the embedded mystagogic runes in their Grand Temple, and thus did they follow their incantations with precision in order to summon another cryptic entity to aid them: *his abhorred uncle!* With this, Mhu'anThul departed with the Ninûsgidzida for the Hellworlds.

But Kthanid betrayed the dark powers then, decimating so large a swathe of Typhojem's forces, particularly the Xothians, who he found an abomination, that it prevented Typhojem from asserting rule of the galaxy. Kthanid then departed for Elysia where his brother could not reach him.

Enraged, Typhojem knew he would deal with his sibling later. Now, at the behest of his furious sister who blamed him, he offered a different plan. If the Javan could not be killed or cowed, then perhaps they could be *bred* to better use. To that end, he commanded the Kathol to depart Thule for the Yeh system (later the Yavin system).

The Kathol had been a critical part of his recent plots, for they were not only a fallen Elder Race, powerful in their own right, but had aided in the creation of his newer races, the delusive Ebruchi, the brutal Jarell of Loligo, and the devious Bogati, named for Bogan. The Bogati had feigned for years to be a Gree offspring and brethren to the insular Phiveans of Galang-22, a ruse that allowed them to serve as saboteurs and spies.

But unbeknownst to Typhojem, the Kathol had recently had an unusual encounter that left them troubled over the course they were on.

A CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE

Princess Qusothhuga was one of the Elder Daughters of Thargorograht. The Great Spider Queens, as many called them—though they were not spiders—were not patient, kind, or tolerant to offspring who were perceived as flawed. They either killed them or fed them to their minions. "Come before me!" Qusothhuga commanded. The infant proudly scuttled before her. He'd been told to wait for this moment to be named, fed, and properly introduced to his mother. Beautiful was she, with so many legs and eyes, and crowned with humanoid form. "I name you… Daar'ok'straedr."

Princess Qusothhuga had fully intended to keep this one until she began to hear the whispered chittering of her sisters that he looked small, weak, ungraceful, and bowlegged. Such terms had no basis in reality given that the Daughters mated with a variety of insectoid races to produce offspring of all shapes and sizes. Besides that, they were but infants. However, if the Sisters were feeling jealous, in a bad mood, or merely wanted to take the proud mother down a notch, they might denigrate and belittle one or more of their newborn nieces and nephews. And rather than stand up to them as they should have, the mothers often took it out on the blameless child.

So, at hearing their disparagement, Princess Qusothhuga prepared to crush the poor infant that had caused her public shame. Thankfully for the creature, she became distracted in her invention of various insults and jibes with which to mock her offspring and entertain the jabbering, jiggering members of the court. This was a ritual the Daughters had developed to allow them to save face.

Unlike other infants that had come innocently before their mothers seeking and expecting only love and sustenance and confused by the derision and mean-

spiritedness of their family, Daar'ok'straedr immediately recognized their wicked cruelty and dark intent and scuttled away while they were distracted.

Daar'ok'straedr had to learn to fend for himself, to steal scraps of food and knowledge wherever he could. After a time, he'd grown rather large. Worrying that he might more easily be discovered but wishing to advance his station, he explored a rarely used tunnel-thread of the Great Web whereupon he found himself on Thule, the former world of the Tholians that was currently inhabited by the Kathol.

The Kathol closely guarded the tunnel that converged on their world, so that Daar'ok'straedr was soon caught and brought for judgement before Kel'tarcPei, First Magnate of the Kathol.

Here, at least, is some distraction from the tedious, Kel'tarcPei thought, finding himself fascinated by the segmented, multi-legged creature that spoke proudly before him. The son of Qusothhuga was shrewd, and from innocent-seeming questions probed behind a pretense of ignorance, Daar'ok'straedr learned who these people were and recalled the rumors of a Precursor race that had been taken and secluded away…

Daar'ok'straedr told his tale in truth. The Kathol knew well of the Night Queen and held all of her Daughters and their offspring in terror. Now he challenged the Kathol. "If you can enhance my stature and strength as you had the lesser creatures you raised to become servants of the wicked Old One, I will tell you a perilous secret and owe you a favor. After all, am I not the grandson of Thargorograht?"

Though his advisors urged him to kill the crooked little creature before anyone discovered the Kathol harboring him, Kel'tarcPei admired his will to live. He also found it repugnant that a mother should wish to murder her own child merely because it was different or did not meet the arbitrary expectations of her family.

The Kathol were about to go on a mission for their master and creator, the Great Typhojem, but in his heart of hearts, Kel'tarcPei felt doubts about the Dread Priest, doubts which had been placed in his mind by the Tholians who once dwelt on Thule, and wisely reasoned that an ally—particularly one with such potential—would be beneficial to have. "Tell me this perilous secret, and be sure that it is relevant to the Kathol! I will know if you are lying, and if you are, not only will I not grant you what you desire, but I will give you into the hands of my people who *will* kill you."

"So be it, First Magnate Kel'tarcPei. But what I intend to tell you must be for your ears only, for *you* will not like this truth…"

"As you wish, but since I will not like this truth, tell it to my ears only and tell me another that I may share with my people."

"You are a crafty one indeed! Listen carefully then." The multi-legged creature then whispered in his ears: "You and your people are not what you think you are. You were one of the Elder Races. Before the Kathol, you had been known as the Q'rel. I know not what brought you to this state, whether of your own will or that of another, but what I speak is truth, learned from the lore-strands of the Great Web."

The First Magnate was horrified by this revelation and thought long upon it. As far as he could tell, the creature had no reason to lie about something of this nature, knowing that it could cost him his life. Besides that, there was something that rang of truth in his words. "You were correct," Kel'tarcPei finally said, "I do *not* like this truth. Now, tell me another secret that I may share with my people."

"You are being sent to break another Elder Race, one that the Old Ones have been unable to break themselves. They are called the Javan. And you will like *that* task even less!"

"How can you know this? Great Typhojem does not share his plans with anyone."

"For those to whom nothing has been given, everything is of value; while the fat lobs and attercops glut themselves in luxury, a wise and hungry creature in search of wisdom can easily obtain it, for there are no secrets on the Great Web that one that is diligent cannot uncover. The brother of Typhojem has betrayed him. This is common knowledge across all of Illathurion, but the Night Queen demanded an answer. And *you* were that answer!"

"This is even grimmer news. Nevertheless, a favor you owe me," Kel'tarcPei reminded him. The creature nodded, and the First Magnate granted him his boon, instructing the greatest mavens amongst them to utilize their abilities and technology to augment Daar'ok'straedr. The results impressed even Kel'tarcPei.

"What will you do with yourself now?" he asked of the now amplified and bulwarked being. "And how will we contact you?"

"You know the answer to this already, for did you not surreptitiously place upon me a bloodborn beacon that could summon me whenever you wished? As to what I shall do with myself in the interim, it is time to confront my mother!"

And so, a short time hence, the Kathol were tasked to inseminate the Javan and re-engineer their offspring into something more pliable and useful. It was just as Daar'ok'straedr told him. While the Kathol had done things of this nature before, to do so with *unwilling* participants was considered repugnant to them.

To delay the detestable deed, Kel'tarcPei demanded to first confirm the reports he'd received from the Zanibar. Several Javan were now subjected to a battery of experiments. Attempts were made at beheading, dismembering, burning, infecting, starving then. Not even psionic attacks availed. The Javan could not be maimed, killed, or altered in any way. Still, Kel'tarcPei wavered in completing the assigned task.

"You have failed to carry out your commission!" growled Tzar Zzradztradl of the Zanibar, confronting him. "Now, we will do things *our* way!"

On that terrible night, the Zanibar performed their sadistic rituals upon the apex of the Temple of Abomination. As the Javan could not be harmed, other slaves were sacrificed to summon the titanic being who would be regarded millennia later as the Ancient Threat of Yavin 4. Like belching black ash and violet voltaic discharge was the appearance of Ythogtha upon the pristine jungle world. The Javan took advantage of the cacophony of the profane ceremony and once again raised their voices as one to call out to the Heavens. But the Celestials would not come this time to imprison the Ancient Threat in the sea. Instead, help would come in a different form.

Ythogtha strode forth like a mountain to crush, dismember, and devour the Javan. But even when he consumed them whole, they would reemerge later, filthy, but alive and well. So Ythogtha took his frustration out on the Zanibar, enjoying the popping sounds their heads made when he plucked them off; after which, he would withdraw to the interior of his temple to sleep and devise numerous other tortures for them.

"This is an unusual world," Kel'tarcPei stated offhandedly to the high-ranking prisoner he had snuck off to visit, "one of great natural beauty but of even greater

preternatural power… It is quite unlike Thule, which seems to have a malevolent will. It is the first place I've been in a long while where I've felt a sense of calm."

"Do the Abomination and its pets bring you calm?" asked the prisoner sardonically. He had been monarch of the Javan, whose world was being fouled by their presence.

"No. The peace I speak of is marred by the manifestation of the Abomination and the disgusting Zanibar." He did not add that it was also marred by the unpleasant task they had been commissioned to do. "What they cannot understand they kill and dissect. I would prefer they not mow down such magnificent trees, concuss such regal mountains, or foul the bracing rivers. But they aren't ones for contemplation and listen only to the utterances of our capricious gods. Perhaps you can enlighten me as to how I might mitigate some of the awful deeds that are planned for you and this world. How is it possible that your people cannot die?"

Korsalenas L'Starmonde, High Regent of the Javan, sighed. He had rarely been visited in the cell they'd built for him. "There was a time you understood these things," he replied. "Now your mind is clouded by the lies of the wicked."

"Wicked or not, they are the Great Old Ones." He said it like it was something obvious that everyone knew. "One cannot defy those whose power knows no bounds. You would do well to recognize that. Our lords are not merciful, but as they are interested in you—in this strange ability you possess—why not spare yourselves further debasement and submit to them?"

Korsalenas laughed gently. It irked the First Magnate, but there was nothing he could do about it. "I do not laugh at *you*," the High Regent clarified, "but at the notion of being compelled to serve such horrors. They are neither great nor even very old. They are liars. And look, *we* have defied them. Our very existence defies them, and even if we could die, we would continue to defy them."

"These are fabulous claims. What evidence do you have to validate them?" Kel'tarcPei asked it casually, but Korsalenas knew he was troubled and sought answers.

"Your own conscience tells you. The Kathol are not the offspring of Typhojem, but his adversaries. You were our kin-race amongst the Firstborn until you lost your way attempting to defeat the Architects. Those of you who were on Altair 4 were taken to the Shadow Vale, where, through arcane foulcraft, you were robbed of your memories. To prevent you from ever learning this truth, those of your people who'd not been on Altair 4 were hunted down by the Infernal Beasts, while those who'd gone to Urthha fell to madness, war, and oblivion."

It was a few moments before Kel'tarcPei could speak again. The monarch's words confirmed the secret the creature had told him as well as the earlier warning from the Tholians. "Indeed, there are some amongst us who do not believe Typhojem is our Maker, though they do not openly speak of it." He wasn't certain why he'd admitted this, only that the Javan held a grace and strength of spirit he'd never before seen amongst the grotesque servants of the Old Ones. It was… *admirable*. He suddenly felt a pang of shame. "I must depart. Ythogtha has spies everywhere."

"You do not have to remain his slaves," Korsalenas continued confidently. "If you would allow it, I might be able to heal you of this delusion, for we have certain inherent *gifts* granted us by the benevolent Celestial who shaped us…" He reached out his open appendage and closed his eyes, unable to see the look of aversion and

astonishment on the face of the First Magnate. *What kind of trick is this? Is this the means by which he will attempt to kill me and free his people? And yet the Javan have caused no harm to my people nor even to the cruel Zanibar who well deserve it. Why, then, am I so afraid?*

After what seemed a long time, he put forth his own feeler to touch the prisoner's appendage. Nothing happened at first, and he began to suspect this was some trick or joke. Then Korsalenas clasped it harder, and in what was only a moment but seemed much longer, he saw himself and his people as they'd been long ago, and he *remembered* and knew then that the Old Ones had deceived and manipulated them.

When next he looked into the eyes of Korsalenas, it was with gratitude and no small amount of shame. "Brother…" was all he could utter in that moment.

Korsalenas smiled warmly. "It is good to see you again, brother."

"It is… *hard* to know this truth… We cannot simply return to what we were. Not now, perhaps not ever." Korsalenas understood what he meant and didn't respond, so Kel'tarcPei continued. "We are tainted, broken not merely by what was done to us, but by the atrocities we committed in our attempt to do what the Celestials had not permitted. We can no longer be the Q'rel."

"Perhaps not," Korsalenas admitted. "But you can be a better version of the Kathol."

"So, *that* is why your people are so pathetic!" the grating, mocking voice came from Tzar Zzradztradei, the son of the former Tzar who'd recently been ripped into thirteen pieces by Ythogtha. "Put your weapon down. I have not come to kill you, though glorious would a battle between us be!"

"Why have you spied on us then?"

"Ythogtha will not stop until our entire race has been devoured. Already, he prepares a thousand-Zanibar orchestra, for he enjoys the sounds of our screams as we are rent apart in various ways."

"Why should that concern us?" Kel'tarcPei challenged. "The galaxy would be better off without your kind!"

Zzradztradei laughed, "There is yet some cruelty in you! It concerns you because when he has finished with us, he will start on you! Indeed, he already ponders it!"

"What do you propose?" Korsalenas asked.

"A temporary truce until we have dealt with the Abomination."

"Am I to understand you have a plan?" Kel'tarcPei asked.

"Indeed! My father, who had commanded the construction of Ythogtha's Temple, had seen fit to put in certain *provisions* to ensure that it could also contain him should he turn on us. Although father was killed before he could do so, I know the invultuation, for he had taught it to me. We need only for you to keep him distracted long enough for us to complete the ritual."

"Why not do so while he sleeps?" asked Korsalenas.

"He does not *sleep* as you sleep! He will punish those who enter his chambers, but if your people can stay alive long enough for the hour, he will be trapped."

"I must inform my people, for the risk and sacrifice must be theirs to make."

After Zzradztradei went to prepare his cabal, Kel'tarcPei freed the Javan and spread word to have volunteers gather at the Great Amphitheater.

Kel'tarcPei wasn't sure how the Kathol would respond to the news, but as he stood before them now in the Great Amphitheater of Phaestos on the fertile Messara plain, where the entrancing musical plays of Lidya and Mæander once drew hundreds of thousands from across the galaxy, he knew that whatever they decided would be up to them: "I have discovered a terrible truth," he began. "The creature known as Daar'ok'straedr had told me in secret, but I could not confirm it until morningtide when the monarch of the Javan helped me to see what had been concealed from me. I did not wish to bring you unwarranted peril. But now I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that our people have been deceived by the Old Ones. Our memories of who we were had been taken from us so that we might be corrupted to the servitude of evil. We were born from the Star Deities whom Typhojem and his kinsfolk hate and fear. Once, we hunted down the abominable spawn of the Old Ones. Once, we stood for what was noble and pure. Now, we are sullied and too few to avenge ourselves, save in this one thing: the durance vile of the Abomination in the pit. And if we survive, we will find a new world and build… for that is what we do best. But first, let us aid our brothers who made known to us the truth and rid their world of the plague that's infested it. Will you join me?"

The Kathol had gotten over their shock and adjusted accordingly with a maturity that underscored their ancient status as one of the Firstborn and cheered. Then, they went forth to the Temple of Abomination. Ythogtha raged and struck out, taking pleasure in shredding the few he caught, but the Kathol were quick and smart, and despite Kel'tarcPei's misgivings, in one hour's time, the spell of the Zanibar trapped and imprisoned Ythogtha within his own sorcery-infused temple.

It was a betrayal Typhojem never forgot and one that he held the Kathol solely responsible for. As Kel'tarcPei had suspected, the moment the Abomination was trapped, the Zanibar turned on them! Into the nearby cities of Thereus and Tikal the battle spilled, and rueful Kathol fought against vicious Zanibar, but this the Kathol did not regret, for that race had been spawned in evil, and cruelty was rooted to the core of their being. Also, the Tzar got to have his wish when he and Kel'tarcPei faced off in combat, and when the bifurcated body of Zzradztradei lay in twitching pieces before him, the High Magnate smiled and acknowledged his foe's earlier words, "Glory indeed! Perhaps there is yet cruelty in me!"

The Kathol considered several worlds before taking the advice of Korsalenas to settle a securable reach of space at the edge of the galaxy past the Marcol Void. Their home beyond the dimensional reef would come to be known as the Kathol Outback. As the sector was also home to the Firstborn Aing-Tii of Aing-Ma and some of their offspring races, such as the Tuhgri, Sebiri, and Yvarema, the Kathol were careful to maintain some distance. The Aing-Tii had retained their connection to the Celestials—whom they referred to as Those Who Dwell Beyond the Veil—and Kel'tarcPei was uncertain as to how they'd feel about their fallen brethren. But the Aing-Tii sent a party to aid them with the assistance of the Fāta of Andowyne, for though the taint of darkness remained upon the Kathol, the Valdilar saw in them the spirit of remorse.

With their consent, the Kathol then reached out to their offspring races looking to flee the Empyrean Wars. The Charr Ontee heard the summons and came; an agricultural race, they would provide food for the region. The Aaris heard the summons and

came; an able reptilian race, they settled a world of their own and created the beacons which would alert them should any dare breach the territory that future astrographers would designate the Kathol sector. And this the Aaris did when Typhojem sent the Kathol's earlier offspring races to hunt them. With the Kathol and Aing-Tii warned of the invading Ebruchi, the Aing-Tii came out to parley with them, and to the surprise of the Kathol, the Ebruchi faction turned from the darkness to the light! To escape the vengeance of Typhojem, some settled Loryx in the Purple Void and became the Zorg; others settled Pak'ma and became the Pak'ma'ra.

Knowing that this was an exceptional case and that others would arrive who would prove less amenable to peace, the Aing-Tii bent the space in and around what was then known as the Qroliak Helicoid (later delineated the Kathol Rift). Should any unwanted visitors dare enter this dense accretion of nebulae, they would feel the threat of terrifying, gargantuan entities and turn aside. It wouldn't work on the Old Ones, of course, but it would keep their client races far from the region.[113]

For the Kathol, a more extreme measure would have to be taken, and at this time they began work on the Lifewell—a crystalline chamber hidden within a fortress that connected to another chamber near the mantle of the planet—that would allow them to safely store and retrieve their life-forces once the threat was past.

To aid in its construction as well as the building of a new civilization, the Charr Ontee provided them with the rare Cosmonium that they'd harvested and hid, allowing the Kathol to again create their protoplasmic, shapeshifting servants. However, this time they genetically altered them with the DNA of a docile race of giant worms in order to make their new hybrid race, called the Maoi, less aggressive.

And so the Lifewell was built along with their cities, and so peace would have been maintained but for one of the Kathol who had come to resent Kel'tarcPei and the course he felt they'd been forced to endure, and this one turned the Maoi against their makers.

While the traitor was eventually found and dealt with, the Maoi escaped underground before they could all be apprehended and destroyed. The betrayal of one of their own spurred concern in the Kathol, who began to conceive that when Typhojem came in wroth to wipe them out, the Lifewell would not be enough.

But perchance there was a way to protect it, Kel'tarcPei thought. And then he recalled the favor that was owed him.

With the special summons made, Daar'ok'straedr made his way to their world.[114]

After he'd left Thule, Daar'ok'straedr had returned to the Great Black Nest in potency and ire to present himself once more before his mother and see how she would react, and ready if he did not like her response, to destroy her. But Princess Qusothhuga was no fool. As soon as she saw how the little creature had grown strong and cunning, she praised him greatly, bestowing on him title and status.

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[113] Such had been done with captured enemy collosae kept in a prism of Inner Space around the Pendar Vortex, where they served the similar purpose of keeping intruders at bay.

[114] Daar'ok'straedr would long years later be called *the DarkStryder* by Moff Sarne who refused to properly pronounce his name.

Despite being granted an elaborate new home and plenty of tasty morsels upon which to feast, Daar'ok'straedr found himself discontent. Nor did he trust his mother, for betrayal was the way of their kind, and they each had their servants watch the other closely. But Daar'ok'straedr did not care for this lifestyle of affluent pretense behind which lay plots within plots, and he sought for a means by which he could maintain power and autonomy. It was then that the Kathol called in their favor.

Pleased, he considered whether or not he should do the deed he'd long pondered and kill Qusothhuga, but at his departure, with not even his mother's spies able to track him, he left her a message: "I leave behind this foul prison you and your foul sisters have created for a kingdom all my own and a freedom which you have never known; and if e'er I see your wicked face or your wicked spies, believe that I will bring the fate you'd planned for me upon your own head."

Kel'tarcPei was pleased to see the now massive creature before him. After explaining the situation and what it was they needed, he said, "Here you will have a life of significance free of dark intrigue. Will you serve as the protector of the Lifewell?"

"It is no small favor that you ask," Daar'ok'straedr replied, "but a series of favors that may very well end in my death at the hands of Typhojem. I will do this in exchange for the Cosmonium I know you possess, for I will have need of additional forces ere that terrible one arrives, and make no mistake: he *will* arrive!"

Though it was no small request, Kel'tarcPei agreed, albeit with misgivings, for he knew that this gift was jealously guarded by what few Elder Races still possessed it, and if the Aing-Tii ever discovered they'd made this bargain with the grandchild of the Night Queen, it would cost the Kathol their friendship. Nevertheless, these were desperate times, and he could not see another way forward.

After the Kathol went into the Lifewell, the creature used the Cosmonium to create the Elixir of Animation with which to begin crafting his own strange races, amongst which were the Zizimaak, who served as scouts; the Ssamb, Yapi, and Krakai, who served as guardians; and the Segmi, who served as builders in replacement of the Charr Ontee, who he banished for refusing to aid him; but the Yimi were crafted in imitation of the Kathol and put to work.

The fears of the Kathol had not been misplaced, for even now the armies of Typhojem were amassing on an uninhabited planet that would later be called Demonsgate. Having discovered the hiding place of the Kathol, Typhojem ordered a portal ripped open to Demonsgate where Drowd'dased of the Jarell led his forces along with Kwyis Nergall of the Uukaablians and H'yashender the Destructor of the Infernal Beasts.

But Zizimaak scouts spotted their ships and sent warning to the Aaris, who lit the beacons, sparking the Ssamb, Yapi, and Krakai guardians to hit their adversaries with a surprise attack that kept them ever on the defensive while other regional forces entered the fray. The Enemy brought enigmatic and vicious weapons to bear upon them, but despite this deadly array, it was the Defenders of Kathol, as they came to be called, who proved victorious that day, and Daar'ok'straedr himself arrived to behead H'yashender the Destructor, an act that caused the remaining armies to flee and hide on nearby worlds and the Jarell to depart for Oon Tien. For their prominent role in their defeat, the Enemy would ever look for a way to punish the Aaris.

As for the Javan of Yavin 4, they had made the decision to leave. Their planet needed time to heal, for it had been contaminated by the evils that had come upon it, and Korsalenas believed another force would soon arrive to again attempt to enslave them. To ensure that none might set free the imprisoned Ancient Entity within the Zanibar ruins by accident or ill-intent, a Guardian was crafted, trained, and put into stasis. The Javan then fled to the elysian home of the Celestials, for a straight path was opened for them and others into the Unseen Realm.

Many millennia later, that very same Guardian would be awoken by Exar Kun. In open combat, the Guardian would have won, but Kun was devious. He trapped, harnessed, and manipulated the creature. Referring to him as Kalgrath, which meant "sentinel" in the Sith tongue, he utilized powerful sorcery to convince him that the Sith were allies of his people. Once seduced, Kun cast a transformation spell over Kalgrath's appearance so that he resembled the fiercest of Massassi—as that people would tolerate no other amongst them. Yet throughout it all, the Guardian would not reveal the location or secret of the temple that held the Ancient Threat, and all who attempted to probe it were met by violent incident so that it came to be believed that the temples were haunted—which was not far from the truth.

After the defeat of Exar Kun in the Great Sith War, Yavin 4 continued to be ruled by multiple dynasties of Dark Lords in short, bloody reigns as members of Exar Kun's Brotherhood of the Sith succeeded their fallen messiah.[115]

Kun's enchantment eventually wore off, leaving Kalgrath to be physically and mentally restored to his former self. Many seasons would pass, and the Temple of Ythogtha would itself fall to ruins. When a sixteen-member team of allied Republic and Sith forces arrived on Yavin 4, each with their own agenda and armed with an ancient tome, talismans, and healers, Kalgrath permitted them to enter the ruins to summon and destroy Ythogtha, now but a being of energy. Several had tried and failed, but this time Kalgrath watched as together they strove and vanquished the Ancient Threat.

The Ones came then and took the vestige of Ythagtha's foul spirit and imprisoned it as they had long ago in the Abyss of Yhe on Urthha, but this time in the gas giant called Yavin Prime.

In the hopes that his people would return for him now that his task was done, the Guardian went back to sleep. Four thousand years later, Luke Skywalker would awaken him. Discerning through the Force that the Guardian longed to follow his race somewhere out in the stars, Luke sent the "Night Beast," as he termed him, on his way to rejoin the ancient Javan who had long since fled for that safe haven beyond the spheres of Skyriver.

And a path was opened for Kalgrath to the Unseen Realm….

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[115] Jorak Uln, the last pretender to emerge from the Year of the Five Dark Lords, was a middling sorcerer who relocated to Korriban where a Sith Academy had been constructed by Kun's disciples. When Darth Revan arrived decades later to rejuvenate the ailing Sith Brotherhood, Jorak Uln was overthrown and banished by his apprentice, Uthar Wynn, who declared himself the new Dark Lord of Korriban as a vassal to the new Sith Magnus.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

IMMORTAL GODS OF THE SITH

RAVAGERS OF THE LIGHT

It was at this time that the Wizards of Wor returned to the land of the living, though they themselves could no longer quite be described as such. That which now inhabited the forms of Zelashiel, Sokratu, Nemo Dak, Grrut, Ramises, and Vitus were adumbrations devoid of all but hunger and malice, ectoplasmic forces of entropy in the shapes of the living. But who they had been no longer mattered to the unspeakable black wills that had taken them, for those voracious and malevolent intelligences that ruled the Charnel Worlds had long awaited such foolish and mighty vessels as these who'd opened themselves fully to them.

The Phantom Lords that subjugated and integrated with their hosts' bodies, minds, and souls had many names and faces in many realms. To those who dwelt in Samûnaru, they would be known as the Ancient Ones, Immortal Gods of the Sith, and Outer Gods, and for long aeons their noisome shadow would fall upon the expanse. Some said their true cores were yet bound in chains of earth and sea; others feared that their epoch of imprisonment had come to its end…

Of those that stood between them and their aims, the Architects had proved to be the most problematic. For this reason did they now assail Shumath-Ghun, the empyreal demesne of Tilotny within the endless gulf, which they called *Ptmâk* in mockery.

Like the sudden onset of grave illness, their presence was felt by her. At once she removed their invisibility. Arrayed around her like the incarnadine bars of a cruel prison were six towering corpse-beings with a range of monstrous faces and flaming eyes. Three others lurked near: a sphere of burning jade that slowly circled the others; a dragonlike thing wrapped around and hovering behind the one with the serpentine head; and an invisible darkness that floated apart and would not be revealed.

"You have not been given leave to enter my domain," she warned while attempting to disperse their atoms into the void. When that failed, she tried transmuting their forms into rocks, plants, animals, even sapient beings—all to no avail.

Low laughter like the braying of the Balyeg erupted: "Celestial castoff, the Earthworlds are soon to be claimed by us, and so we have come to prepare the Great Sea for our dominion. As it was your very aims that cracked open the rift, there is *yet* a seat at the table… Leave your aberrant siblings and join us in our great enterprise!"

But Tilotny only scoffed. "Shall a Queen sit amongst the vile, feculent, and fallen? As to your impotent dreams of the Earthworlds, the Humans are spread throughout the vastness of space. You know but few true Earthworlds and cannot discern the rest from mere colonies, for which reason you've tried in vain to assail them all. Go back to your cairnlands. I have no time for dissolute phantasms!"

"If the galaxy will not bow, it will burn!"

Enraged by the arrogance of these corposant interlopers and frustrated by her inability to destroy them, Tilotny reached out to her siblings as she had at their start. Turning a shade of cinnabar, she proclaimed a curse: "I *banish* you from before me, foul exhalations! Sithlan! Eosforos! Astor! Lothan! Zhahar! Kako! Yamm'ka, who is amongst you! Windagon, who watches and waits! Fallen Aion, whose black spirit leads you! *Gods of Nothing!* Nevermore will you enter our domain—you are cut off from your pits of excrement and hateful legions!"

As a whirling black spot, an anti-nebula appeared swelling into a massive yawning helix that exerted an inexorable pull to draw the Charnel Gods out of Illathurion. In resentful silence they tested the strength of her malediction and strove to counter it and incinerate her, but they could not touch her nor undo the banishment, and as they began to dissipate, they spitefully reduced her home to a cloud of dust and gas. "Is that not more fitting for a queen of cinders and ash?" said one before he passed on.

The region from which they emerged would later be called the Ihala Spiral and then the Indrexu Spiral to honor the Queen of Ranroon, though its true origins were never known.[116] Turning their odious gaze from it as if the prior confrontation was nothing more to be considered than a mote of stardust, they thrust forth in fury to the gap then opening for them upon Drômencas.

Only at her birth had Tilotny felt so powerless. When first she'd met that ancient thing on the throne, she had no idea their powers were such as this, but deep down, she'd known—for she'd looked into those empty sockets and saw the hollowness of hoary and unholy chasms. In many ways, these beings were closer to those that were called her offspring, but those were at least subject to her. But these *Dark Ones* were deicidal, unliving, universe-destroyers: *And what are my enemies then if not the foulest of corruptions to be eradicated? Yet against them I stand as one helpless, able to banish but not destroy or even transform. Or is that what they want me to believe?*

She thought upon the matter with greater exactness. They had turned the Jostran, Sobekk, Malak, Urey'la, Eruthros, and many more, making them aggressive, warlike, and prideful… more like Humans at their worst. But in each case, there was one common denominator:

The Jostran had built a vicious suzerainty on Human slaves and host-bodies, only to be defeated by internecine conflict and a farcical band of Humans and their alien allies; they now serve as slaves to the Greedle.

The Sobekk were scattered—as she'd orchestrated—with various factions attempting to build a coalition. Only the cybernetic Xylan posed a threat. Guided by a hidden power, no doubt one of these, they were currently engaged in building planet-sized droids to exterminate Humans from the galaxy.

[116] From *I hel* or *I'Helle* ("to death" or "to perdition").

The Malak fools were even worse than her augmented races; in their hatred of Humans, they engineered monsters that then turned on them; and in mimickry of me, they even fashioned a goddess for the Humans to worship.

The Urey'la failed to overthrow the Celestials in their War of Dominion and concealed themselves as the Reamar amongst a world of Humans on Argoth, against whom they strive.

The Sith continue to pose a galactic threat, and are ever breeding with and recruiting other races, particularly Humans, all in service to these Ancient Ones.

Tilotny thought back to the mysterious events that occurred on Terra I, Terra II, Sol, and the other Earthworlds. Mankind had been the target in every incident involving the Dark Ones. And what was it the entity had said to her? *The Humans are ours!* What was it about *that* race and the Earthworlds that so obsessed them? The nostalgia behind the naming of colonies after their original homeworld may have helped the Humans, as it resulted in considerable confusion amongst the Enemy, who spread thin their forces to target pseudo-Earthworlds such as Arda, Ardana, Arkadia, Arrth, Auratera, Eta Vulpeculae II, Thearterra, Solaceterra, Terra XI, the deliberately deceptive Tera Con Prime, and even Human worlds not so named such as Chronos.

This unrelenting enmity that they held towards Mankind likely stemmed from their time on that original Human homeworld, but Tilotny couldn't quite fathom it; the Humans were at times attractive but also irksome. Cold Danda Sine had decidedly mixed feelings about them, but he was of two minds on most things; Splendid Ap found them curious, but what he didn't find curious she could fit in her hand.

Because the Outer Gods were intelligent and powerful, they presented an existential threat to the very expanse that she sought to rule, and because they sought to intimidate her, bring her to their side, and remove her as an obstacle, that meant that she was a threat to them as well. But only if she could figure out how…

So it was that in this era of great suffering, when the cancer of war had spread far and wide, the Ssither and their conspirators performed the Great Ritual, spilling much blood from the prisoners-of-war they'd kept alive for just this purpose. The rift was torn open! Poring forth from the necromantic pits of the Hellworlds through the obscene gaps like boiling pitch from a belching caldera, the ravagers of light and life wound out of the gate into the galaxy, hungry to roam and hunt and destroy.

Wounds in the fabric of the Living Force, each one was marked with a unique sigil upon his cloak—the crimson eye, the puzzle box, the jade sphere, the yellow sign, the silver sentinel, the eight-pointed starburst, and the intertwined serpents. To dominate all life was their goal, their sedition, but even the cruelest tyrannies required systems of governance. To ensure compliance meant feeding the fear of pandemonium and stoking the desire for superiority. So did they covertly wear the masks of both—the wicked dragon of chaos and the wise serpent of order—and the two fed one another in endless cycles of war and peace, ever shrouded in a lie.

EVERLASTING SHADOWS

The Ancient Ones flew through the galaxy, passing over worlds like locusts over fertile lands, leaving hatred and war in their wake until they returned to Mount Zhyrion on Drômencas where the Sith across the galaxy had gathered for their coming.

Rivers of fire and blood streamed down the mountain as storm clouds in the shapes of giants descended. The Outer Gods entered the Grand Temple like Night-Soarers on the death-hunt to bring rewards to the elite of the elites. Twenty-one of the Kissai (three from each of the seven houses) along with eighty-seven of the greatest warriors and wizards were permitted to observe the rituals, while the rest were instructed to wait in the courtyard of the Synagogue of the Serpent. The new members of the Shadow Council, no longer designated Ninûsgidzida but *Ninûshwodzakut*, stood inside the firelit gloom of the Grand Temple in the midst of the sixty-six Ssither.[117]

Past the illimitable gloom in the censer-lit, fusty interior of the main hall and beyond the ebony trivets, ochre-stained dais, and obscene ophidians of jasper and jade, foulest shadows stirred in the unnatural chill. Then, betwixt the mighty pillars and sphinx-crowned entablature, *they* stalked forth, gliding or floating in unhallowed procession, the unspeakable Eldritch Ones.

By the light of the morning star, demonic teachings and methods of life-extension were imparted that putrefied the spirit and corrupted the mind. Amongst these were:

[117] While *Ninûshwodzakut* is understood to mean "Knotters of Entrails," in the original, *Wodzak* derives from Wutzek and is translated as "Demon," with *Wodzakut* as the plural form. With *Nin* and *Ninûs* meaning "weavers," "knotters," and, earlier, "lords," the term at this time would have meant "Demon Lords." Thus, the Ancient Ones elevated the Kissai by granting them authority over powerful evil spirits. Only over the Shadow Beings did they wield no power.

Itsu-ashmûd, a cantraip in which the questing spirit wrestles with his victim for control of his body; it is reserved for a willing or weak subject, as failure results in loss of the spirit to the void. Known in Basic as *essence transfer*, various *Mechu-deru* rituals are based on this. *Chwitsiqsa* is similar but refers to demonic possession, often by Space Wraiths. A less demanding form used to send one's spirit into objects is called *krimpfrûm*.

Rakhkfrûm, the deadliest form of *orskfrûm (*the *derriph midwan* powers) or *consume essence* involves the nourishing of oneself on the life-force (what ancient texts called *bal*) of another in order to scale and increase power. When utilized with *kripkâth* (the Bornless Ritual) and *tîmurog (*Terrify*)*, it becomes a harrowing ritual demanding mass sapient sacrifice to attain apotheosis. Reserved for the highest of the high elites, it was employed in varying ways by the Five, Ku'ar Danar, and Darth Vitiate.

The lust for immortality became the driving force for the enslavement of worlds and justification for their specious teachings of domination: "Who better to rule the spheres," the vile gods said, "than those who will not submit to death, who have the strength, vision, and discipline to rise above the fat and soft herds to dominate life?!"

In a grim procession, they departed the temple to the great courtyard of the Synagogue of the Serpent where awaiting them, organized by houses, were members of the lower four houses: thirty-eight Kissai wizards, one hundred Massassi, and one thousand of their greatest warriors from the colony worlds. Penned in a circular cage were the haggard and remaining prisoners-of-war taken from the worlds the Sith had conquered, along with traitors and others who'd failed in their duties.

None were prepared for what came next.

The first to address the onlookers was a large glowing jade sphere, known to the erudite as Kordil, Kako, and the Lord of Corruption, a title that itself represented a corruption of one that in ancient times had been called Prince of Stars. A voice emanated from it, projecting above them. "Those who serve the cowardly and weak Elder Gods say that one's actions have consequences. In this one thing do we agree!" As he drew nearer to them, the remaining prisoners backed away as far as they could, but it availed them little as a verdigris-colored aura beamed out from Kako to penetrate them. In seconds, they melted to pools of oily-green ichor. Only a few were left standing unharmed. "Show no mercy unless it is to your advantage to do so."

Garbed in a shimmering black cloak, a slender and tall being with the grinning face of a corpse stepped forward. Black, silver, and golden orbs floated before and behind him. "Seek," he commanded, and they rushed forward to the Kissai wizards of the four lower houses, extending a diverse range of blades from which to impale, drill, slice, blast, and eviscerate them. To the shock of the other houses, the Kissai fell in violent paroxysms. Eosforos, who is the Lord of the Dead, then lifted up his right arm, palm up. The mutilated, massacred Kissai rose to their feet as grisly puppets in grisly formation.

From this, the Eruthros elite learned the hateful ritual of *tsaiwinokka hoyakut*, known in occult circles as Reanimation of the Dead.

As an undulating river, Lothan the Great Serpent glided forth as the Fanged Goddess, a massive many-headed Leviathan with cruel, noctilucent eyes. In her left arm, she bore a scepter. "The time of punishment and reward is at hand. Your Seventh House is no more; they will instead be your slaves."

The many heads then sought out a target, finally landing upon a dozen younglings, and they perished before their gaze. From their bodies rose twelve shadows that were called *Tukkuu*. To the surprise of all, six Ssither were then gazed upon and died, and from them emerged six serpentine shadows they called *Dimmu*. "This is the invultuation of *châtsjenkut!*" which in Basic is known as Shadowmaking

It was then commanded that in each generation, every ten years, the firstborn of the Kissai and Massassi were to be made into *Tukkuu* or Shadowguards, which would be bound to twelve of their best younglings, two from each of the six houses, and if the firstborn happened to be amongst the best younglings, the *Tukkuu* would be made from the next youngest in line. By this, they understood the severity of their calling.

The Shadowguards were to serve as helpers to the younglings until the trials at their thirteenth age—at which time they would battle the *Dimmu* Spiritshadows of the Ssither, who were more powerful than the Shadowguards. Those who survived would be granted that Spiritshadow as a reward, and the former Shadowguard would pass on to the next generation. As the Sith grew in numbers, so too would more of the sepulchral Shadowguards and Spiritshadows be procured.

Dimmu Spiritshadows are now known as Force Wraiths.

The next of the Immortal Gods to shimmer forth was an arcane being with a pale mask; its humanoid torso was clothed in a golden robe, but its hidden lower trunk ended in a mass of tentacles upon which it ambulated. Astor, the horned Lord of the Planes and Interstellar Spaces, raised up his left, gloved arm to open a sulphurous hole above him. The already darkening skies turned black and turbulent. Fog spread across the land as if the very clouds themselves had fallen, and strange lights shone within.

The hole was a rift. From it, the Old Ones burst forth in rage! Having been transferred against his knowledge and will, Typhojem targeted the Lord of the Planes, reaching out a fleshy arm. With the tentacles of his mouth flapping wildly, he squeezed his fist, causing that one to implode into a pulpy, twitching, yellow mass.

With the Chaos Serpent presiding over the arena, Ooradryl dealt with the slender god of death until his body was little more than a brittle and flaking husk that disassembled into ash and blew away.

Thargorograht shot forth iron-like death-webs that ensnared the glowing green orb, which broke those strands while morphing into a giant crocodile-like entity that opened its fanged mouth to swallow her. Wrapping its arms to the writhing body, she flew upon the creautre, and with her great mouth tore open its underbelly until entrails and blood spilled upon the ground. Upon these, her servitors went to feast.

The many eyes of Thargorograht narrowed in consternation. It had all happened too quickly and easily. She gazed over at her siblings who were coming to a similar conclusion. Just then, a burning globe of obscene fire rose up and increased to gargantuan size as if it were a moon of Drômencas. Soon, it was the sole light in an unnatu-

ral pitch that had fallen upon them. Appearing adjacent to it, a violet tetrahedron inverted into a rhombus and back again; on the other side, a yellow-colored nebula rose into view, taking the form of an arcane glyph that spun round and round.

Brittle laughter sounded from the black void: "And so, in violence, do all things come forth. Welcome, Ancient Abattoirs, Offspring of the Abyss! You have been missed"

A vast shadow-serpent circled around them, eyes ablaze with unnatural light. "In the destruction of our tulpas is your purpose renewed," said the Fanged Goddess, her form morphing to a floating, faceless, nearly formless but female humanoid, "for now you know you can never hope to defeat us! What you do *not* know, for this truth has been stolen from your memories, is that you are as kin and kith to us!"

"And you have a greater purpose in these spheres than service to pretenders," announced a gleaming-eyed giant arrayed in sable armor and a voluminous, crimson cloak. This was the Lord of the Worlds and God of a Thousand Forms known as Sithlan, Thasaidon, and Taaran. Behind him, the armored form of the other possessed Ninûsgidzida, beaming with brutal power, strode silently forth. "Three thrones lay open. All nine must be filled to prepare the way for the Father of Shadows and Lord of all Darkness who is beyond time and space, gnawing at the center of eternity. Together, let us eradicate all light in the universe and remake the worlds in *our* image!"

"Why do you speak to us and not the Architects, or even your own adepts, converts, Titans and others?" asked Thargorograht, deeply suspicious.

"The Nine Thrones are connected to the Earthworlds inhabited by Mankind after they were brought to this plane. Though they have been guarded by the Diathim, they can be claimed through domination or the chaos of great war. The Titans are yet imprisoned. The Architects have chosen to oppose us. And so must they too fall. If you deny the invitation as well, there are others who yet vie for these cathedrae…."

"Why do we wait?" Ooradryl pressed.

Not wishing to be supplanted or forced to fight a war on another front, the Old Ones agreed to serve these Outer Gods. To Typhojem, the Lord of Corruption bestowed Drômencas, Sarn (later Garn), and Tython. His offspring and acolytes would retain those worlds they'd already established. "For these and the other appointed planets and moons will be as throneworlds in the coming Shadow Galaxy."

To the Kindred of Ooradryl, the Lord of Worlds bestowed, "Kesh, Koorivar, Luka, Saqqar, and Heffrin, besides the worlds upon which you are already worshipped; go forth and feed on all that you will!"[118]

To Thargorograht, the Lord of the Dead bestowed upon her and her Daughters all of Illathurion, but under her breath she grumbled, "Illathurion is *already* ours!"

"Three you are, but four there were," the Lord of Corruption rasped. "What has become of Mekal, the God of Pestilence? He is known to you as Mnggal-Mnggal."

"Imprisoned!" countered the black mass of moving parts that was Thargorograht. "And so he must remain, for the Devourer heeds no boundaries." Her rutilant eyes

[118] Luka is the original homeworld of the Miraluka.

were fixed upon these hated rivals, conjuring in her mind various means by which she might eliminate them permanently, for she alone remained loyal to Tilotny.

"I remember you, Daughter of Ycnágnnisssz, even if you do not remember me," the Ochre King started. "Do you wish to know your true name, the name of your mate, and that of your offspring and great offspring?"

"The name I have is all I need," she replied, "and my mates and offspring are many!"

"Very well! To the *Matriarch of the Swarm*, I bestow unto you Alara and Oroboro and Lesser Tana, where your Daughters will find many upon which to feast." The Night Queen had narrowed her many eyes at the unusual and exotic title, but they widened when she heard his gifted worlds. "Once you are of the Nine, you will have no problem ensuring that Mnggal-Mnggal does not overstep his bounds."[119]

"Will you not be here to ensure that yourselves?" asked Ooradryl coyly.

"We will *always* be here," said a voice that came from the aether.

"And yet there are other realms over which we reign," added the Lord of the Planes, conjuring up an image of galaxies beyond Skyriver.

"Know that if this realm does not come to heel," Sithlan declared, "it will cease to be!" The appearance of Skryiver began to darken as suns died across the expanse until none were left alit. "But let us not think of such things just yet and celebrate our long-delayed re-unification!"

The wild pernoctations of this night of a thousand horrors drove many to nympholepsy and death as the emancipated Ancient Ones presented the one-hundred and twenty allied worlds as a banquet for their chthonic guests, who lapped up the etheric juices of many inhabitants, and those that survived were reduced to slaves.

The Shadow Council sent the inimical Etoomveers to Droxine along with the deadly Sith hornets to help in the conquest of the Estrella sector, which became known as the *Esstran* sector, which means the Realm of the Estranged Ones. As the Sith spread out in the region, the Net of the Waste-Lords, or *Nache Bhelfia*, was the name given to the hyperlane connecting the Sith's most sacred worlds. Thargorograht went to hunt the Critokians on Critoki who would not submit to her, while the Radama were so severely depleted by the Kindred that their lifespans were reduced to a decade.[120]

Yet even these were not the most horrific events that occurred on that blackest of nights, and as the Old Ones watched from above, it became apparent that the Outer Gods did not merely want servants. What occurred then cannot in good taste be described here, save to say that the former Eruthros opened themselves up fully to the Dark Ones—and as that hateful and hypnotic music played over chanted foul rites, merging with unseen, excoriating voices while intoxicated bodies swayed to discordant rhythms, *they entered into them!*

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[119] Alara would later be known as Alarevi.

[120] Following this, the Critoki survivors fled to Yavin 4, while the Radama changed their name to the Devlikk (meaning, "the bedeviled ones") and began constructing their cities as mazes so that, if ever the Nemesis returned, their race might have a chance at survival.

Sithlan—for whom the Sith had been named—appeared as a glowing shape on the horned dais above them. He wore a nemes headdress with the horns of a ram, a half-pleated kilt, armbands of gold and lapus lazuli, and a gold usekh broad collar with a large crimson, carnelian eye; tanned Human skins hung upon his shoulders and the tails of beasts from his belt. The black falcon faceplate partly revealed a skeletal face as humanoid as his body. Raising his scepter, he announced, "From all the races that have sought our approval, you alone have been chosen as our special heritage, *our* chosen ones! No longer will you recall your pathetic lives as Eruthros, for you have rightly wiped out that weak race. Forever and henceforth, you are Sith!"

It is one thing to subjugate a single being; it is another to coerce that one to shift states from horrified spectator to unwitting accomplice to co-conspirator until the mind is in full accord with the invited one. Thousands could not be controlled in this way, nor was it required; violence and propaganda would accomplish that purpose. So would their offspring and their offspring after them be instructed, for though the kernel was planted, the tenebrous powers had to be invited into their being for it to sprout. So the black seeds of contaminated fruit flourished as they followed the evil inclinations that led them. Henceforth, the Sith would have part of the essence of the Ancient Ones within them so that each and every member of that nation, young and old, male and female, native-born and foreigner gave themselves to the shadows.

It would be a rare thing for a Sith to purge the foulness that had been grafted unto their spirits, minds, and bodies—and only with the greatest of struggles in opening oneself to the light could they free themselves of its hold… but it could be done.

The spirit of Bogan is not as the spirit of Ashla, just as hate is not as love. The former is born of weakness while the latter is born of strength. The Dark Side provides immediate power but is fleeting, for which reason the Sith must constantly replenish themselves by taking from others. The Light Side gives without measure, so that as it is shared, the giver and receiver benefit. To compare the two as if they were equal and opposing forces is the lie of the Sith gods, and so pervasive has it become that even the wise have come to believe the light needs darkness to maintain balance. Perhaps this is because the language of Basic does not properly convey the metaphor correctly, for the Darkness cannot be likened to the natural darkness of night, but rather to the spiritual cancer of deceit, apathy, treachery, and greed.

Similarly, the spirit of Bendu is not the twilight realm between light and dark. It is the preservation of the natural order until the malignant tumor is rooted out once and for all time. The Jedi, for all their good intent, do not fully understand this, and at times, their allegiance to governmental institutions has caused grave imbalance. But the Sith understand nothing, for they are consumed by the shadow-self and its unyielding desires and given to fits of rage when they are not met.

One more, the Phantom Lords moved through the galaxy. Having poured part of their essence into the Sith, they were in an enervated state when they went forth to feed and replenish themselves, sending out their monstrous legions in the belief that the cosmos would soon belong to them, for there were none who dared oppose them, not the weak Celestials who did nothing as the Architects brought wrack and ruin to the galaxy, nor the aberrant Architects who had failed to seize power in Samûnaru.

Not all of the Ancient Ones had poured their spirits into the Sith.

In her cunning, Lothan, the coiled serpent and Mother of Abominations, had taken a special few for herself to serve as potential vessels in the event that things did not go as planned. She now came upon one on Sicemon, the world she occupied and renamed after herself, which, henceforth, would be known as Lothal

Prior to his elevation, Daritha Jensaar was known as Lord Xander Gora. The descendant of StarCrow the Wise—whom Lothan had once inhabited until that body's destruction at the hands of the accursed Defenders—the boy had been born more studious than many of those at the Academy and had immersed himself in the lore of the ancient past to the detriment of more social pursuits, for which reason he'd been called the Cold One, the first of the titles he would embrace.

"I have devised a means by which the Celestials may be destroyed," the gliding spirit hissed to him. "The Hidden World cannot readily be accessed, but I will open the secret path to it. Once there, you will know where to go. Forge a weapon like none before it."

Having studied this one his books, he replied with confidence "So let it be done!" and entered the odd ship provided him. But she remained silent as he hurtled into the sea of darkness, the starlines extending mystically before his eyes. He rambled on anyway as if the Great Serpent heard his litanies, advising that she eliminate or humble some of her fellow gods. "I know you don't share your confidence with underlings, but your rivalry with Astor is well-known amongst the upper echelons, and my research has shown that the Lord of the Dead is not trusted by many either."

Like a vast ocean was the Force, ebbing and flowing through Skyriver in ley lines of luminescence, from the Life-Web weaved in Elysia to the axis points of the Living Force on Solay, Zotakh, Magna, and Angorathea that served as Gateways of the Midichlorians, with channels in and out of the Koornacht Cluster to and from Isorropía in the Deep Core, the fulcrum of life and light in Skyriver and other numinous regions.

In a way, the Dark Side had its own conduit, but it was as a toxic pool that seeped out in a trickle until it had leaked into so many unexpected places, it contaminated even time. Stemming from the Charnel Worlds of Illathurion, it soaked into pockets of space throughout the galaxy to eventually collect in and contaminate the Unknown Regions. Lothan had discovered a way to tap into its raw power and wrung from it a strange and poisonous fruit.

The strange ship called *Lethe* now landed on a strange world. "Is this…?" he asked.

"Mortis is considered one of the Hidden Worlds due to the fact that it holds the Well of the Dark Side," Lothan replied, speaking again for the first time since before he departed: "With these materials I have supplied you, Xander Gora, you will know what to do." He strode forward, grabbed the sack from the locker that had just then opened, and exited the vessel onto the strange world.

He hadn't needed to lay eyes on the towering volcanic blaze to locate it, for the Wellspring was a locus of great power. This font was considered a myth by the Sith, but he'd studied enough to know better. The Well was the means by which the galaxy's state of balance in the Force was measured by the Celestials.

And he was going to use it for their greatest adversary.

A MISSION TO AVERNUS

It would take several days. No easy job was it to forge so precise a weapon made from such strange materials onto which he added his own blood and unabating ambition. And ever he had to keep awake for the coming of the Ones, though it was rare that they visited. Lothan would have her prize—a black blade of immense spectral power that manifested itself as a breach in the Force to annihilate any life it touched—a thing with a malevolent will of its own and a weapon that could kill a Celestial. Amongst its many names, it would later be called the Dagger of Mortis.

He returned to Lothan's lethal ship which took him to Lothal and through its secret burrows deep beneath the surface. Hours passed until they came to a sinister open gate, an Infernal Gate. It was far from the only surprise. The ship passed through the antemundane lintel, emerging into a sunless space, a vast and winding fissure lit only by massive pillars of lava. Seven stars whirled in the weird skies above, and as he proceeded down its immense depths lined with the uncountable bones of the ages, the ship's sensors picked up movement in the far depths below towards which he descended like a myrmin caught in the athanor of the Anakim. The lights proved too feeble to let him see what was stirring beneath, but that was just as well, for there were things no sane person should glimpse, and he struggled in vain to turn around.

But it was far too late for that. Hours passed hypnotically, pummeling him with visions of the monstrous dead until he reached what appeared to be an endless, inky sea. Massive forms beyond description undulated in that sea, colossal coils intertwining with heavy chains, all churning together like a boiling ocean. Madness overcame him, for here was horror never before imagined, an emanation of ultimate evil, revolting, and incomprehensible. A gargantuan head with a thousand twisting tentacles then rose up from the mass to greet him. His vessel was but a tiny stone in its burning eyes. So had Yamm'ka, Lord of the Abyss, arisen.

"Tallyman of the Dead, I name you," the giant head declared, "no longer to merely reckon the names of the dead; instead, you will add new names to the tally."

He nodded as if in a trance, for his mind and heart had been seared, murdered, and restarted. "What is thy bidding?" he asked.

"Our effigies are soon to depart Drômencas for the Vorsuul system. Gird yourself, for you may need use of this blade—forged from your blood and our blackened spirits—to kill! Do not let any know you carry it, but if it is discovered, kill that one too. When the deed is done, return to our realm, for you shall rule it in our absence!"

And so once again *Lethe* began to ascend of its own accord away from the mind-scorching miscreation, heading for the gate and Vorsuul and the doom that awaited.

A LEGION OF GHOSTS

Death came with crackling red lightning in a charred sky while furious funnel clouds burst open with an angry quaking like giants pounding war hammers… Yet, this was all a prelude to the appearance of seven malignant corpse-things with flaming orbs descending from the black sky.

The sparring rulers of these worlds had faced down the Kindred and fought off the armies of the Old Ones, but this time felt different. Still, they would not now surrender, nor would the tens of thousands who'd massed with them. It was ironic that they now mingled amongst the enemies they'd battled for so long. Here was no hope of salvation. No allies would come from afar to save them, for the ships of the Firstborn had come and gone. They had rejected them. Nevermore would they see the Great Interplanetary Arks, the *Phoenix*-class space stations, the Xrus-Ones, Sanhedrim, Korvayachts, Qeracrafts, and A'nang ships, for the Celestials had foreseen the Doom of Vorsuul and tried to warn them. Those who stood watching were grateful that at least *some* had chosen to flee. But not them. They had done little but wage war since the first wars began. Now, as they stood before ghastly, implacable entities, not a few felt a pang of regret. Perhaps they had been fools after all. But there was nothing to be done about it now. So, they would fight one last time.

For the Dark Ones, such valor in the face of hopeless odds meant nothing; this was but one of many places in which they would empty the galaxy of light and life should its people choose not to heel, and through them the galaxy would be sent a message.

Tilotny had arrived in secret. Here at last she would bring her long-developed plans to fruition, but the stage now set was far direr than she could've imagined. She had expected the peoples of the galaxy to be angry at the defilement of the Humans, in terror of the Old Ones and their armies, and railing against the Celestials who would not defend them. While some of that had come to pass, the situation proved far more complex than she'd anticipated. The galaxy had not turned en masse against the Celestials; nor had she counted on having to deal with diabolic entities who rivaled her in power and ambition but exceeded her in cruelty.

For the last time, Tilotny whispered to Ap to open windows to all the worlds. With the defeat of these evil ones, the galaxy would see and hail her as their great savior and goddess. But she was not as circumspect as she'd thought. The Ancient Ones sensed her, and as they hovered above Oseon, the primary planet in the system, they began to feast. In mere moments, skins blackened, cracked, and peeled as organs cooked and burst, causing thousands upon thousands to writhe in unimaginable pain.

This was not how it was meant to be, they railed as they watched the bodies of friends and family contorting around them. *This was no battle. This was nothing more than degradation and dishonor.* But it was only the opening salvo. The Necromantic Ones raised up the slain. They stood silent, those unliving puppets with vacant eyes, before turning their ravening gazes upon the living.

Tilotny waded into the midst of the chaotic mass. Wriggling corpses hurled themselves upon her. With the wave of her hand, she flattened them into dirt—and this time they stayed dead. But this world was lost, and she moved on to the next one that the Dark Ones had gone to… and then the one after that. Tilotny had seen countless wars by now, but this was something new, and she wanted it stopped.

While yet feasting on a mass of twitching limbs, execrable things borne of the Hellworlds looked up and threw themselves upon her. Undead Ssither came with necromantic spells; Spheres of Death tore through armies; bloodied Rafa ran amok; great bat-winged nightmares dropped from above. Tilotny spun them all to cinders.

On the final world, she caught up with the Outer Gods then gorging themselves on the life-forces of all the suffering and dying. To rid themselves of the nuisance that she presented, they called up Abhoth, an ancient horror that stalked forth as a towering mountain of eyes, teeth, and limbs built from the tens of thousands of corpses strewn about. The Lord of Uncleanness buried her. Then all was silence, and the Ancient Ones turned away in scorn, for none could escape the maw of Abhoth. But Tilotny had been but biding her time, having concealed herself from their senses, and she emerged from beneath the massive, stinking heap of the defeated god.

With an apoptotic roar, the Ancient Ones unleashed the dreadful powers they'd kept for last. The obliterating force tore through the entire Vorsuul system, generating a storm to end all storms born of pure Darkness that macerated all the planets and moons around them. The only survivors had been those who'd gotten ferried out of the system by the ships of the Precursors; but so many had refused to evacuate that they'd been able to save nought but a small percent of the populace.

Tilotny remained untouched as countless numbers were devoured by the avatars of evil. Still invisible to their senses, she slipped invisibly between the imperious and proud shadows of the living voids. She could feel the loathsome triumph of the Immortal Gods of the Sith soaking in the roaring waves of their genocide. And she could sense their anticipation, for in the midst of such massively unleashed energy they looked to acquire even greater powers. The Necromantic Ones could communicate telepathically, of course, but save for those who'd opened themselves to them or displayed strong emotions, they could not read minds, and they well guarded their own thoughts from each other. *But what if they thought their increased powers allowed them that boon?*

Tilotny's final understanding of their weakness had come earlier. As the Humans and their habitations were the main obsession of the dark gods, Tilotny had merely to take the time to look and learn and understand how they operated. Humans *built*. They built families, communities, systems, and stories—and nearly always for the betterment of the individual or society. That these were frequently corrupted or torn down never stopped them from continuing to build. Despite all the horrors prior generations or they themselves suffered, they persisted in having faith that what they planted would grow. At last she'd surmised that the Humans had likely been unified at one time, just as the races of Skyriver had been. Love, cooperation, and peace made up their true nature—not enmity and tribalism as so many believed. But they were constantly being pulled apart by external forces preying on their internal weaknesses, fear, greed, and pride. And now she understood that this disunity came from the Enemy, who, empty and incapable of building anything lasting, sought to destroy.

Tilotny now implanted a perfectly impersonated voice into each of their atramentous minds. It would not take long, for by their very nature, they were mistrustful:

At last, I have the power to rule on my own!
His usefulness has come to an end!
He has become weak and unworthy!
True Darkness calls for the death of our own!
Power cannot be shared!
Let us use our newfound power to eliminate him!

As they each looked upon the suspected culprits with unbridled hate and disdain, the so-called Immortal Gods turned on one other with annihilating rage.

Hunger cannot feed hunger. The dismal, ectoplasmic forms that the tenebrous deities had collected and woven from their willing servants now liquefied until their astral-embrued essences flamed up unto the heavens.

Only then did Tilotny rematerialize. So that the galaxy would see that it was *she* who was accomplishing this great deed, she behaved as if casting a spell upon them to cause their destruction; such a performance felt beneath her, but it was a necessary act to demonstrate who the heroine of the story was.

With an angry push by Tilotny and a touch of flair, the dissolved, impotent imprints of the Ancient Ones burst into shifting colorations that would pass through the region each year in commemoration of their destruction. The last to go was the Lord of the Planes, and he laughed as he melted into a yellow stain in the stars, at which point Tilotny heard a whisper, "Well played, small princess! I will see you again…"

She had attained her goal. She had saved the galaxy. The galaxy had witnessed it.

But as she floated in space amongst the pulverized planets and moons, watching through the windows that watched her, she knew then that there would be no triumphal parades, no salvific proclamations of love and devotion for the Goddess, no fireworks or colorful banners, save for those stigmatic splotches that now streaked across the sky above her in varying spectral colors.

The galaxy—having been forced to witness the appalling horror of millions dying at the hands of insane and foul deities—was traumatized.

To their eyes, what are we to them but monsters such as these? As she looked around at the grotesquerie before her, knowing that she was in part responsible for the devastation that had occurred, her dreams of godhood shattered, for she finally saw it as a distasteful thing to have wished for—and the truth of it stung.

Just as Ap closed the windows, a sudden cold blade swiped down upon her! *No ordinary weapon is this*, she immediately knew as it flashed again in a killing stroke that only barely missed her. She did not recognize the one who wielded it, but the blade had clearly been augmented, for it brimmed with a ferocious hunger. Tilotny peered at the raging swordbearer and considered the implications of his weapon; easily avoiding his next thurst, she considered ending him, but she had no taste for death. "Leave me, Tallyman of the Dead, before you provoke me to wrath. Your masters are dead." The Cold One's eyes registered surprise before turning back to rage. They would ever be filled with rage, for he was mad, and as he raised the dagger for another strike, he vanished as Tilotny transported him to the Charnel Worlds.

Though its significance is long forgotten, what remains of the Vorsuul system today are the belts of asteroids called the Oseon and the six colors of the Flamewind which annually shines alit in reminder of those unspeakable voids. Many aeons later, they still have an evil effect on the sensitive who come to watch them. And from time to time, as the galaxy grew old, a pallid mask and yellow sigil would be seen before vanishing again, but there are few now living who know what it means.

So it was that the mephitic years of the Empyrean Wars gave way to the incendiary conflagration between the Celestials and the Old Ones, which would begin again a short time later with the War of Temporal Planes.

BOOK V
THE SECOND SHADOW

"This is a galaxy of war! War unending. Such is its nature. There may be other galaxies upon which other principles are based, but ours is founded on war games."
~*The Book of Unspeakable Words*, by High Priestess Voodenne Idellist

Old lover of the suns and stars who sorrow thus,
Death is but another shadow, cheating us.
Yet, happy is the one freed of strife,
And e'er I hear, with startled ears attending,
Amidst the battles and horror never-ending,
The long, long roaring of eternal life….
~Klarkash-Ton, *The Celestial Record*

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

THE WAR OF TEMPORAL PLANES

SECTION I: THE WRATH OF TYPHOJEM

So unexpected was the defeat of the Ancient Ones to the depraved minds of the Ssither on Drômencas that they cut off access to the Infernal Gate and turned inwards, focusing instead on their own strange affairs and alchemical thaumaturgies.

For Thargorograht, the eradication of those moribund entities was met with glee. Now, as the Old Ones gathered in secret, she declared that the Architects and they would control the vast spheres of Skyriver. "Tilotny has proven herself greater than all others," she declared, but Ooradryl and Typhojem remained silent, each considering how best to move forward in their own agendas while agreeing to carry on with whatever strategies the Architects had in mind. They yet feared Tilotny, especially now that she'd demonstrated the terrible extent of her powers. So, they laid low until her tempest cooled and she revealed the next stage of her plans.

But the months and years passed and Tilotny did not declare Skyriver for her own. As far as the galaxy was concerned, the Empyrean Wars had come to their end. Thargorograht continued as before, but the schemes of the Night Queen were not always heeded, for as she mordantly brooded, *The Old Ones—though ostensibly allied—do not hold to the same designs and allegiances.*

The catalyst for the War of Temporal Planes (or the Interdimensional Wars, as it was known to some) was precipitated by the acts of Typhojem who extracted critical, recondite knowledge from his ever esurient siblings.

It was a day like any other when he burst upon the largest of the Shrines of Kooroo on Gelgelar, driving many of the Glarsaur supplicants mad before his presence (which pleased the Marsh Wyrms into whose lairs they fled in blind terror). *"Why hast the galaxy not yet become ours?"* Typhojem telepathically projected with a ferocity that would have broken lesser minds. *"Why dost the Kindred of Ooradyl fatten themselves in their iniquitous temples, luring worshipers instead of consummating the war for the Outer Gods?"* Indeed, the Kindred of Ooradryl had been feeding well.

Making unpleasant sounds that equated to laughter, Ooradryl warned, "We are not your subjects, O Great Priest of Immemorial Chaos," pressing the weight of their authority into his mind as if to embed it there. "Do not seek to command us."

"Do that again…" Typhojem warned, *"and I will remake your gilded shields into ovens for your entrails."*

Ooradryl and his kind grew larger before him. "You should *try*…" they replied darkly, reinforcing their will even stronger, which caused the shrine's koor-stones to bulge outwards. But then they lightened their tone and pressure and resumed their

usual sizes. "Do not be jealous that we have drawn more disciples than any besides our great sister. We are not your enemy, *brother*. There may be some who are, and against these even your great rage cannot stand…"

"Profligate have you become, brothers!" Typhojem seethed. *"When the galaxy is ours, there will be countless worlds upon which to feed."*

"Is this what has raised your ire?" teased Waru.

"You think us sundry in our consumption?" asked Nyeegath.

"Akin to the Uilegdaal of Cykranosh," laughed Uthoqquan, "or the Deathbirds of Iirkthoss?" The others laughed in unison at their private joke.

"The best essence must be pure," Ooradryl informed him, "untainted by corruption, madness, or greed."

The mental sound Typhojem made was akin to a snort. *"You speak of luxury and indulgence! What is* that *to power?"*

The Kindred ceased laughing. "It is the *ultimate* power!" they said in unison. "But if that is what you seek," Ooradryl continued, "enough to surpass the Architects and Celestials… it *can* be obtained… for we have discovered another plane hidden beyond the time-space boundaries!"

"I have swam the seas of Darkspace," Typhojem replied, referring to his trips through the hyperlanes, "and tasted its denizens…"

"That is but one of *several* planes! One to which where your traitor-brother fled!"

When Typhojem demanded they show him what they meant, they projected into his mind a glimpse of a hidden crystalline realm that they'd recently uncovered, and he learned then of the mysterious Crystal Riders who could enter and exit at will. "Mayhaps with one such as these, you might find him and conquer the dimensions. We are content as we are. But one such as you craves dominion of that which lies beyond the stars…" They knew of what they spoke, but said this only so that he might depart Skyriver, which they sought to harvest for themselves without interference. They would say nothing further and floated off through the portal to Haffrin, where they would enrich themselves on the juices of the devoted.

Typhojem departed in ire, pondering the ways in which he might destroy those impudent creatures while wondering at the things to which they alluded. *This must be how Kthanid and the cowardly Elder Races escaped!* he thought. What the Kindred had said was true. His power had not reached its full potential.

Typhojem brought the knowledge of the Crystal Riders to his two Xothian hierophants who studied the mysteries. *Upon this will you now focus your attention!*

"They remain an *enigma*," Fatalomin informed him after a time, "but we know this much: thus far they've remained neutral in the war. They are said by some to have given birth to various forms of sapient crystal life, but we cannot verify these rumors. Silicon-based life has long existed; even the Sith have done breeding experiments with some, engineering the twenty-foot-tall giants of Thoth."

"Who the Crystal Riders are, none know," rasped Orbrebba. "Some say they are of the Elder Races. Others believe that they are something else altogether, dwellers of an interior world of their own, vast and utterly alien to those in the galaxy outside, yet connected to it by an unseen matrix attuned to both the inner and outer, and *able to*

penetrate the veil between them. If this is true, they would, indeed, have the properties to force open a door unto other planes—even perchance to the provinces of the Celestials if that is what you seek!"

"I seek results and will spend my wrath on all who fail to produce them!" Typhojem thundered.

"Short of a Crystal Rider, there is nothing *we* can do!" replied Fatalomin haughtily. "Crystals have no inherent magical properties beyond the aesthetic and practical, for which reason they are used as storage devices."

"If we had the *right* crystal, however," Orbrebba added quickly before their master got too angry and obliterated them, "we might be able to alter one of the gates to achieve your ends. But remember that we are but humble servants not mighty gods!"

Typhojem stalked out, intent on securing some, for he would not be thwarted. It was fortunate that the Sacred Worlds were unknown to him. Without the inviolable Outer Gods present, he would have to assume authority to ensure their plans came to fruition. *And if his siblings did not hold to the way of Darkness and plotted against him…!*

Ooradryl as much as said he had enemies. He knew Thargorograht to be unequivocally treacherous, hatching scheme upon scheme in her revolting Black Nest. And from his spies he knew she'd already conceived the idea of cross-dimensional travel—restless as she was to ensure abundance for her growing offspring and servants—and though it would take long millennia, the Great Web would eventually border strange and far-off dimensions where the vanguard of her forces would explore and infest. It was prophesied that when the Great Webs of Gorog were complete, all the universes would be connected, and then the end would come.

As to Mnggal-Mnggal, even imprisoned he remained an existential menace. But only for now. Once Typhojem sat secure on his lofty throne, not even the Cancer God could thwart him.

That left the Celestials as his greatest threat, they to whom his flaccid brother had turned. He vowed with foul execrations to storm their domain and destroy them!

Finding the silicon-based offspring of the Crystal Riders would be no easy feat, even for one so mighty as he. Alas, as the arrogant, dim-witted, and outspoken Kaldane researchers, D'rawk and Diwn-Ain, came to inform him before he slowly disemboweled them, one was *already* in the grasp of his sister: the Shadowstone!

It had been some years earlier that Thargorograht had declared war on Geognôsis. She had wasted years attempting to lure the Greedle into her service, but ever they deferred, openly refusing her emissaries and claiming independence from both the Great Old Ones and the Elder Races. *Clearly, they need persuasion*, the Night Queen thought ere sending her myriads amongst the Bartokk, Flakax, Sikurdian, Yam'rii, and Noehon along with Hydras, Merdeth, and Orray to surge the moist, green planet and drench it in the blood of the Greedle.

In the conflict that ensued, some of the Jostran slaves managed to escape through the Jumpgate. Some returned to Munlali Mafir; but the haughty amongst them, intending on restarting their lost prestige, opted to settle in Companion Cresh.

For Typhojem, now coming in secret upon this engagement, there was opportunity. He was a powerful sorcerer in his own right and Geognôsis was rich in mineral

properties with which he would produce his own living jewel. That it would also humiliate his sibling and reduce her ever-growing forces was an added advantage.

The dreaded Old One redirected a comet out of its trajectory to collide with the planet's largest moon. The cataclysmic fallout wiped out vast numbers on both sides, leaving the world arid and burnt for long years. The Greedle and those races who could live underground with the Poldt survived deep in the planet's interior.

The Night Queen would have no proof of her sibling's treachery, but ever there were whispers upon her vast web….

Typhojem's tests resulted in several satellites, the Crystal Passage, and the rare Rol Stones, but no viable energy source. His next target would have to be larger.

Typhojem next spread his wings before the sun of Qixoni.

His attack here would be seen by all as a sensible move to wipe out the vexatious Qix—sapient energy-beings who, along with their sentient pets, the Sparx, had traversed the hyperlanes at dizzying speeds to aid worlds in need of protection. The A'qavish-qerach, native to the Voidfire Nebula, an incomprehensibly vast spaceborne web connected to pockets of Inner Space, had created the Qix and Sparx after imprisoning their disloyal Titan offspring in the then unoccupied dimension they'd uncovered. Their new offspring served as advanced defense matrices, living energy fields that could protect entire sectors of space from hostile incursions, for which reason the Old Ones had not so readily destroyed many of their choicest targets. Few of the infernal forces could penetrate their mass of writhing vectors as they moved about seemingly at random but always with deadly intent. And as with other energy creations of the Precursors, such as the Teezl and Tirrith, they had proved a considerable source of irritation during the war. But such lesser beings were beneath his notice.

In terror did the Qix and Sparx flee as Typhojem exerted all his effort to drive the intense temperatures of Qixoni high enough to go supernova, causing those who hadn't fled quick enough to spark and twist into different forms as they were driven mad, becoming those malevolent energy monsters that haunt the cosmic corridors of Jumpgates and access portals to Hyperspace, destroying friend and foe alike.[121]

The metals and minerals of Qixoni's nearest world now melted and refused into scarlet crystals, and this was the prize his efforts had wrought: shattered shards that are today known as Qixoni crystals.

Without warning, Typhojem was hit with a burst of blinding light! This was accompanied by the vision of a great winding serpent. *On one ancient Human world, he saw himself as a skull-faced sorcerer known to his servants as the Great Priest Kathulos; on another he was the wizard Surama; and on another the sea-god B'Moth; all avatars of himself worshipped by millions!* He awoke and looked about. The aftershock of the sun's destruction could not have caused this. He was suddenly hit with excruciating pain, though he was disciplined enough to channel it into the Qixoni crystals. They now lit with the fire of unhallowed life!

[121] Resources had to be funneled to Spinner ships with special blasters to destroy these threats, what the pilots who hunted them identified as Flippers, Tankers, Spikers, Fuseballs, and Pulsars.

Typhojem had succeeded, but something would forever be wrong within him—as if a kind of crepuscular madness had crept into his mind from a forgotten past.

With his Qixoni crystals (also called Bloodstars for their resemblance to that celestial phenomenon) in hand, Typhojem's hierophants were able to enhance the Anti-Force and use blood magic to engineer more. An Infinity Gate was appropriated along with other kinds of gates that were then reconfigured. To their dismay, the crystals had no discernable effects on the Infinity Gate, save for their destructive capabilities that more often than not resulted in explosions in their facilities.

With the Gree Hypergate, however, they produced a ripple! It was not yet powerful enough to open even a narrow fissure, and additional crystals produced no greater effect, but it was enough to indicate progress.[122]

The Gree would know the secret to this, but they would die before giving it up. As pleasing as that would be for Typhojem, he did not have the time to waste, nor would he risk his actions being discovered by his rivals or the contemptible Celestials.

His quest, however, *would* be discovered, and the attempt to stop his forces from attaining a Transdimensional Gate became known as the War of Temporal Planes.

Many adventures could be told of the brave Star Warriors who risked privation, torment, and death on sundry worlds to destroy the means by which Typhojem might rule the universe were he to obtain but one gate; its massive energies harnessed to pierce an opening through the confines of space-time would allow him access to other planes.

After a confrontation with his sister over the Stone of Shadow had turned sour and nearly violent, Typhojem sought the wisdom of his sire, only to come away frustrated, for Cold Danda Sine did not impart wisdom unless it was first woven in riddle.

"A mad Sun Dragon now resides within you!" the black sphere that was Cold Danda Sine intoned, his red features pulsing as if in delight. Typhojem bellowed, causing the space around him to erupt in a terrifying display of fire and lightning—an effect that was intensified by the amusement of Cold Danda Sine. "You are an entity of great rage," Sine continued. "But rage blinds and fury invites madness! You have destroyed many homes of the Elementals, Scion of Typhon; why be angry that one struck back?"

"I come to you for objects of worth, and you speak to me of fables and metaphors."

"Of *greater* worth are they," Splendid Ap replied, aglow like a porphyritic cresset. "And no metaphor is this! It has been said that the stars have naught but gases at their core, that they are not sentient and have no hearts, certainly not of living beings… *But that is not true!*"

Typhojem could barely contain his wrath at the intimations of these absurd creatures. Procreators or not, had he the power, he'd have pummeled them into oblivion and offered them at the graves of the Outer Gods along with the goat that was his mother.

"Energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transmuted," Ap went on, more for his own interest than to educate an Old One he knew would learn nothing new. "The

[122] In revenge for his murder of their fellow scientists, the Kaldane smuggled a stash of Qixoni crystals to the remnant of Sethan wizards, for which they were handsomely paid. The wizards then implanted them into their brains. This gave them greater psionic abilities which led them to seek the starstones on Basut.

Starbirds and Firedrakes are a mystery even to me, but it is clear that that which you sought is now within you, unattainable to you for so long as you live."

Sine laughed darkly and Ap would say no more, blooming roseate. After Typhojem departed, enraged and unable to comprehend the hateful enigmas, a bright light began to shine from within Sine as something emerged from within his black penumbra.

"It is as you say," whispered Orax the Crystal Rider. "The rest of our kind will be safe for a time."

"From *that* one, yes," Sine noted, "but no bargain had we made in regard to any other."

SECTION II: RIDERS OF THE CRYSTAL MAELSTROM

ORAX

Cold Danda Sine had earlier called forth Orax the Crystal Rider, Guardian of the Shards, to aid in a joint experiment he wished to embark on with his sibling. She appeared before him as a shining being akin to a star. "You summoned me, but I am under no compunction to assist you," she had said at first.

"Yet, here you are," Ap stated. "Given the timing, I surmise it is no coincidence."

"Indeed," Sine replied. "You answered my summons because of what has recently befallen your sister at the hands of the Kindred. Now that you have discovered Typhojem's designs upon the remaining Crystal Riders, you seek protection. *But can the great Architects even be trusted?* you wonder!"

"You are correct," Orax acknowledged, grateful that on her world of Orax, which yet whorled in the far off reaches of the Outer Rim, her offspring were safe under the protection of the UrSkeks. "I had come for knowledge, but it appears I am in need of something more…" She hesitated for only a moment, contemplating the risk of depending on such ones before deciding. "You have told me of your wish to ensnare those unnatural entities of adumbration for your hermetic experiments…"

"The Orphic Mystery!"

"I will bring volunteers from my people to aid in this. I request of you in return assistance in concealing me, my sister Jennoshim, and our offspring from Typhojem, for as you know, we are that being's target. Two have declined your protection, one was taken by the Night Queen and another was in hiding. We will not be used by Typhojem to breach the barrier. Proud and terrible as that one is, he cannot cross you and live."

"It shall be as you say," Sine declared.

"Why did you not ask aid of the Celestials?" Ap inquired.

"You are privy to many of the galaxy's secrets, Splendid Ap, but there is much you do not yet know and things that even I will not share."

Cold Danda Sine laughed. Crystal Riders did not possess spines, but if they did, Orax had one and would have felt a chill go up it. "It is not often that I impart advice, but you are a wondrously cryptic being! You would do well to inform the Conclave of the Firstborn of the plight of your people—and of the threat to the galaxy if such things concern you—for Typhojem will not stop until he has his portal… and it is only a matter of time before the mad Old One finds and cracks one of you open!"

"In that case, I have an additional request from you!"

"It shall be as you wish," Sine replied, knowing already what it would be.

Orax took his advice and telepathically revealed all that she'd learned of Typhojem's plans to the Cephalons, who brought it before the Conclave of the Firstborn. After this, she summoned forth her Shard offspring willing to embark on this strange adventure. With the thaumaturgical assistance of the Architects, they re-purposed the crystals into interlocking, prismatic angle-snares, which were then placed in starry positions around Sine's boreal estate. The activity drew forth the vengeful shades and hunting shadows who loomed near to Sine's realm, Z'lykarior, as they often sought to spy upon his deeds. That was when he sprung the trap laid for them![123]

Laughing as the sadistic entities were rendered immobile within the angle-traps, Sine said, "Let us see what you can do when your energies are bent to *my* will!"

Sine and Ap implanted thirteen of them within the hearts of several worlds in the galaxy, connecting them intrinsically to the life-force of each. They then observed as no constructive changes manifested. Despite the energy now drawn from the Shadow Demons, death and decay were not halted, and no symbiosis was achieved. The Shadows could not effect positive change nor could life draw upon their corrupted élan without becoming deeply contaminated. In fact, the systems in which the soul-snares were implanted showed greater deterioration, as if the very spleen of those brooding spectres seeped out to curdle the spaces around them. The ore of Phaegon III's moon were infused with black energy; the dimensional walls within the Cowl Crucible Nebula weakened. In some places, the effect was localized, such as on the plains of Abundo on Bardotta, the seas of Recopia, and the Osua mountains of Shatuun. Other worlds were wholly contaminated, such as Durace, Usk, Lotho Minor, Weik, Attahox, Sarn, Zigoola, and the moon of Tython. Ap and Sine wondered anew at the ill effects the Charnel Worlds must have had upon Illathurion.

As this matter clearly belonged to the realm of the metaphysical and they could not procure a Celestial for questioning or experimentation, Sine recalled to mind the words of Orax and thought upon those called the Whills.

Their tests concluded, Sine asked Orax. "To what purpose will you put *yours*?"

"Those trapped within the prisms will be made into a race of warriors."

"That does *not* seem wise!" Splendid Ap ventured.

"I will have full control over them," she replied sharply. "As you yourself indicated, we cannot hide forever. I will transport them to Siletia in the Sil'Lume system of the Seitia sector. There the Silentium whom I have befriended will help me construct for them metallurgic bodies durable and resilient and implant the angle-snares within. In this way, when the Enemy comes to harm us or our kind, they will rue the attempt."

"We should destroy the prisms and their hosts," Ap told Sine. "You saw what became of the cybernetic Xylan. Even now, they stir, eager to cause mischief."

But Sine had already made up his mind. "There is no way of knowing if we can *permanently* destroy the Shadow Beings. In this way, we are assured they remain trapped. Perchance they may serve some good use."

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[123] Angle-snares are also called soul-snares, angle-traps, mind prisons, shards, and psychocrystals. Some are identical while others were built on similar principles. Hundreds were used for the labyrinthine Shadow Traproom on Liok.

Orax got her wish, and the Silentium—those sapient droidlike beings who'd been shaped in the geometric forms of their Mu-Abin makers—aided her in constructing quantum physical bodies on a molecular level that had the potential to grow through self-replication. They were called at this time Metatrons. As the process would take some time before completion, Orax went into hiding on nearby Luminaire.

On Luminaire there dwelt a Human colony who held her in high regard her as the Lightstar Crystal. She helped them develop their technology and even allowed herself to be utilized as a source of energy for their capital Luminicity, for the expenditure of energy cost her nothing. All went well until a series of troubling events ended with a jealous baron attacking the royal family. During the heated engagement that followed, Orax was broken in two. This had an unexpected and appalling effect upon the baron and his people, transmogrifying them into skeleton-like fiends!

Many battles and intrigues would pass before the broken piece was restored, allowing Orax to depart, leaving behind an offspring who wished to remain to aid them.

Upon her return to Siletia, she discovered that the Silentium had abandoned their work on the Metatron Project. The Mu-Abin had learned what the Silentium were constructing and urged them to cease production, explaining the dangers that such abominations would unleash if ever they broke free. Disappointed, she settled on a world called Ilum, where the Gree were endeavoring to study the curious Adegan crystals that grew in its caves, and there she rested and remained hidden for a time.

In the depths of Siletia, however, the Metatrons had already awoken and hidden that fact! With no eyes upon them, they continued where the Silentium had left off. Wrathful and devious, they expanded their stature, adding bits and pieces to themselves until they'd become a fearful sight to behold. So the hope of Orax and the Silentium birthed a sinister form of life that would soon be known as the Abominor.

KEDAVRA

Within their world's aureate interior, the Arbran Precursors had built a paradise of typhonian chasms, mountainous fungi-forests, and fissures within which giant etiolated cacti grew to great heights, and when the Empyrean Wars began, it was there that they went to live. When the enigmatic Kedavra came exploring their wondrous depths, they received her with welcome as a traveler in hiding. She in turn imbued their world with her fulgurant aspects, bringing forth Sunstones and Bræsens, giant, glowing stalagmites that extended outward from their planet's core. The latter were sapient offspring, while the former were sentient and drew the attention of Cold Danda Sine.

In time, Kedavra became known as the Jewel of Arbra, for the oval, cobalt-colored gem not only provided a better source of energy for the underground cities in which they now hid from the war tearing up the stars but ensured that no solar or lunar attacks could destabilize their world. Her energy-readings, however, drew the attention of others, and proudly had the Arbrans boasted of her blessings. This not only puzzled those on the Conclave of the Firstborn, who wondered who this Kedavra was, but it informed the Sith via their Eruthros representative that the Arbrans were in possession of a mysterious source of power.

The Arbrans shortly afterwards left the Conclave of the Firstborn, as had several, in protest over their acceptance of Human allies. They agreed with the Gathering of the Green that the Humans had overstepped, causing many of their races—the Hujiban, Kushiban, Gerban, Rushban, Lepiban, and others—to suffer as a result.[124]

But in the aftermath of the horrific actions of the Gathering, the Arbrans were suspected as having been co-conspirators. Thus, when the Ssither sent sorcerers to conquer Arbra and take the living crystal, intending to find a way to weaponize it, the Arbrans felt as pariahs with no one to turn to. And for this reason they made a pact with the clandestine agents of Thargorograht who had come under cover of night to treat. As foul as the heinous creeping and chittering Nytocris were to Arbran sensibilities, the Sith—who had been their brethren—were far more loathsome.

With packs of Gorgodons, the Sith stormed Arbra. The Arbrans did not need to feign fear and acceded to all their demands. Three nights passed, as the lascivious sorcerers bedecked as kings with precious gems held a lavish victory feast. The Arbrans bowed and scraped and secreted a special extract known only to them into the wine. Soon the revelers fell to a deep and soporific sleep. This done, they signaled the Nytocris hidden deep in the underground passages and caves who swarmed upon the mesmerized Sith with rending claws and sharp mandibles. After every last bit of Sith flesh and gristle was consumed, the chamber was sealed off. The Gorgodons yet roam the vast underground caverns while the jeweled skeletons of their masters sit grinning in the dark.

Now it was time for the Arbrans to fulfill their end of the bargain. With great reluctance, they led them to the location of the Crystal Rider who resided in the deep core of the planet. Kedavra felt the approach of the Nytocris and cried out for the aid of her Arbrans allies, but they would not heed her call. While the Arbrans wept at their grievous betrayal, Kedavra fought with all her might against the infestation of unrelenting Nytocris, and even her crystal offspring tried to defend her. The Bræsens electrocuted and burned many of the swarming arthropods, but in the end the untiring Disciples of the Night Spirit won out, prying the heliotropic gem from her central chamber through which she was connected to the crystal matrix at the heart of the world. With Kedavra's removal, a terrible groundquake occurred. While her pitiless captors flew to the safety of the gate, numerous Arbrans were wounded and killed.

The Arbran's victory over the Sith allowed them to escape the worst of the Empyrean Wars, but it came at the cost of their collective conscience. They rebuilt, utilizing the Bræsens of Kedavra to continue powering their world, but the glorious underworld cities of Arbra would never again be the same, nor would they, and as their powers began to diminish, they sought a plan of redemption.

It occurred to them to produce a new offspring race, a strong race that would serve to protect them from adversaries. Of course, they had lost much of their innate gifts that had once come so naturally to them. To supplement these, they searched the galaxy for Cosmonium and the hermetic manuscripts of mystery cults claiming to have sacred knowledge left behind by the Celestials. Their elders would not have done this, but the later generations were not so wise.

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[124] Today, they are more commonly known as Hoojibs, Kushibs, Gerbs, Ru, and Lepi.

Years hence, their much-celebrated new race came about in two forms.

The first were tall, green, muscular terrapin-headed bipeds, four-armed like their progenitors and with the ability to jump like amphibians. The second were similarly shaped but more lizardlike and tailed, and upon their ridged heads protruded four horns. The Arbrans collectively called them Agorhyffen, the "ones to bring war's end."

The Agorhyffen grew populous and learned all they would, particularly in regard to the Arbrans' crystal-based technology. Then, one day, Sir Gwhells, who was the most forward-thinking of the horned ones, came before the Thaumaturgist Circle, which was comprised of the spiritual and political leaders of Arbra, to inquire about their sibling races. The Arbrans explained that in the Earliest Days, they had brought forth the Lepi, Gerb, Ru, Hoojib, and Kushib, amongst other offspring races which were now spread out upon their respective planets in the galaxy.

Feeling guilty for not having checked in on them earlier, the Arbrans used their esoteric Osan Stone to descry their worlds, and learned that these races were either engaged in fierce conflicts or suffering persecution. One of the consequences of the galaxy's turn to darkness was the introduction of depravity in the forms of carnism, which deemed the flesh of their rabbit-like offspring a delicacy, making them a target for Humans and other corrupted races who imitated their abominable practices. In order to better survive, many of these joined the Judicious to fight back, which, although understandable, was grievous to the Arbrans (though they themselves had chosen that course) as it resulted in high mortality rates. Whereas older Lepi who were frightened might go tharn, young kits who experienced trauma often died of heart attacks and shock. This meant that despite frequent reproductive cycles, war meant that entire generations were wiped out shortly after birth.

The Arbrans cursed themselves anew. "Had we not been so self-absorbed and blind to the travails of our offspring, we might have prevented much suffering and death."

But Sir Gwhells comforted them, assuring his parent race that if they sent his people aboard ships, they would bring their brothers succor, for that is what they were made for. This pleased the Arbrans greatly and they did as suggested. Stored with sufficient aurum to power their ships for years and a crystal-based weapons system to defend their sibling races and repel oppressors, the Agorhyffen flew off as the Arbrans watched in gratitude, hoping for their success and speedy return.

But the moment they were far enough away, Sir Gwhells became *Lord* Gwhells, and his horned ones renamed themselves the Gorfodi, "Enforcers," and declared preeminence over their non-horned siblings, whom they called the Gorffi, "Disgusting Ones." Instead of providing aid for their beleaguered sibling races, they established a homeworld called Agora, in the Sluis sector, upon which they established a rigid political system that profited from slave labor. It would be known as the Caste.

Unwilling to sit by and permit this, the Gorffi went on the offensive. A fierce civil war ensued. Eventually, the anti-slavers drove out the Gorfodi and those non-horned Gorfii who'd embraced the philosophy of the Caste. With them went most of their warships and weapons, but this was a small price to pay, for they were glad to be rid of the demons. Now, the Gorffi renamed themselves the Agorffi.

When the Arbrans learned of these events, they grieved anew and rued the day their fathers gave up the Jewel of Arbra, though none of it could they undo, and often they wondered at Kedavra's fate and whether she yet lived.

At that time, the merciless minions of Thargorograht had taken Kedavra to their mistress with great fanfare into the Great Black Nest of Illathurion. Like an abdominous grimalkin, Thargorograht had been brooding in her caparisoned center when it happened. The war effort had not been going as well as she'd desired:

The Assemblers had been repelled by the X'Ting and Zeetsa on Cestus, with the Neebray preventing reinforcements from entering the D'Astan Sector.
The Colicoids were stuck on Colla, battling the native Occare (later Hueche).
The Proliferans had become obsessed with sending out scouting parties to other worlds to expand their kingdom.
The Schizodes were getting decimated by the combined forces of the Ruurians and Xi'Dec, for which reason she had to send out the Tiss'shar.
Despite securing the loyalty of the Quesoth, the Killiks, Aldereenians, Fefze, Ghishi, Hakaran, Kari, Ketton, Pitrillistian, T'kkrpk, Vratix, S'krrr, and Shikitari of Shi'kar continued to decline her overtures or openly oppose her.
The Kamarians, Hiromi, Taurill, and Sooman were endlessly proving useless.

Although this state of affairs represented but one strand in the vast web of her forces, of which the Bartokk, Vindar, and Sikurdians were doing well, and she reckoned that the Chiggnash, Yam'rii, Entymal, Nimps, and Noehon would also prove victorious, it did little to assuage her foul mood in the face of an even greater setback: the treachery of an Elder Daughter, Arra of Atheria, who, claiming to have found wisdom, made a pact with the Celestials and departed the Great Black Nest.

So it was that Thargorograht chittered in glee the day she received Kedavra. Between the Osan Stone, augmented by her seers and thaumaturges, and her many spies, the Night Queen had eyes and ears all over the galaxy, and many who feigned to serve others actually reported to her. Due to this influx of information, she'd been able to surmise what the Crystal Riders were. And with so precious an acquisition, she would be invulnerable to her siblings and in a far better position to protect her offspring, and herself from her offspring, particularly those Daughters who might seek to usurp her. Not that she blamed them, of course. It was their nature to be grasping and tetchy when they wanted more food or resources to deal with their brood—for which reason the Great Black Nest continued to expand.

With Kedavra she might even be able to open windows in and out of Illathurion and reign amongst the stars, perhaps even surpassing Tilotny's influence one day. Kedavra would not easily be swayed, but Thargorograht was a patient creature. However long it took, Kedavra would come to adore her as all her children did. After snapping off her dangerous spines, she gently smoothed her surface. Such a prize must be handled delicately, with care and even love, a quality her siblings and even her Daughters lacked. To all others, she was simply the Stone of Shadow. Thargorograht spoke the name Kedavra only in private and she kept her ever near, whispering to her of monstrous tales and spine-chilling secrets, all the while weaving intricate incanta-

tions of comfort, pleasure, and affection so that by the end of the War of Temporal Planes, the Jewel of Arbra had truly come to love her Mistress and captor.

After her spies informed her of Typhojem's intent to penetrate the veil of dimensions, the Night Queen instructed the Disciples of the Night Spirit to take the Shadowstone and conceal themselves where her sibling's forces could never find them.

When Typhojem burst into her chamber demanding the Jewel of Arbra, for he too had his spies, prompting her servitors to swarm in a frenzy to defend her and destroy the interloper, Thargorograht refused. She knew to what use it would be put and, after calming her protectors, told him as much: "Your despotic rule does not accord with my plans! Go fight with Tulukhu, your rival. Go and seek out the Necromantic Ones to whom you gave your allegiance! Perhaps their ghosts yet prowl the Outer Void as their lies haunt your mind!" Her mockery might have ended in her death, but as he drew nearer, ten-thousand ignescent eyes peered out angrily, wings fluttered loudly, mandibles chittered hungrily; their forms creeping out from every part of her lair, a myriad of minions in shapes too numerous to count. So did he withdraw in a fury, thinking long and hard on the various punishments he would inflict upon her, but knowing that a division in their ranks at this time would only be exploited by the hateful allies of the Firstborn. But once the galaxies were his…

It was through this interaction that Kedavra first learned of Typhojem's perilous plans and telepathically warned her sisters. But even in this Thargorograht had played a role, for she *wanted* Kedavra to do so, thereby ensuring that her sibling would gain no foothold unto other worlds from which he might gain advantage over her.

JENNOSHIM

She looked upon her beloved offspring one last time. It was the hardest thing she'd ever had to do, but if she didn't leave them behind, they would be at far greater risk. So she left, knowing at least that the Tsil were secure on Nam Chorios where they were imbued with great sensitivity to the energy field of the galaxy. Any attempt to harvest them would prove disastrous for the harvester.

Jennoshim appeared on a world in the Deep Core known as Mítra, but called Thra by its inhabitants. Although she was now hidden and safe from Typhojem, few civilizations had been spared in the Empyrean Wars, and it hurt to watch the once gentle, dreamfasting inhabitants battling against one another over a conflict that had begun during that terrible conflict. Perhaps she could help. Jennoshim knew this act would forever bind her to this world, but she did not operate on fear or the desire for self-preservation but on the tender voice that spoke within her.

With her considerable strength, she reached deep into Thra's largest mountain, touching minds with the wild but still serene Elementals that dwelt within the world in order to form a shape into which she imbued a good part of her insight, vigor, and empathy, generating a consciousness that would maintain harmony amongst the peoples, flora, and fauna. She would be called Aughra.

As Orax sang out to Jennoshim from across the stars, Jennoshim sang back, each conveying their love and bond with a song that harmonized so powerfully with the vibrations of the Whills, the flow of the Force, and the numinous notes of that ancient

Lost Chord that a Great Conjunction occurred within Thra's three suns, opening a portal between worlds.

What happened next could only be described as irony.

Cast out from their current homeworld of Orax, eighteen exiled Firstborn UrSkeks came through, heretics seeking exoneration through service. They had gone against the Resolute ideals of their siblings and saw the Empyrean Wars as the Judicious did—a galactic conflict of good and evil in which they must choose a side. Amongst their apostate beliefs was a rejection of the third and higher way, of *any* way that did not incorporate violence as a necessary solution. So had they attempted to use Orax pragmatically, as a weapon to destroy the armies of the Old Ones. When this failed, they were condemned by their brethren. They then thought to use Orax as a way of purging their sins, but when she vanished this too was deemed blasphemy. Halfheartedly accepting the punishment of temporary exile, they went through the gate, expecting to arrive on the world they'd previously inhabited, the rogue planet Aether. Instead, they'd alighted on Thra, which had become the home of another Crystal Rider.

The inhabitants of Thra welcomed these *ambassadors,* who became part of society. But the eighteen were dismayed to learn that it would be long before they could return to their home. The ancient gate on Thra had been destroyed in the War of Supremacy fought between the flora and fauna during the time of the Gathering of the Green. Aughra believed there were other hidden ways that she would have to explore. So they built and gifted her an orrery to help her better understand times and seasons. What it revealed was that a thousand years would pass before the next Great Conjunction.

A millennium passed. A network of mirrors was built to focus the light, and once more, the three suns aligned to bear down on Jennoshim, whom they called the Crystal of Truth. All of Thra came to attend the ritual that would see them go home. But things were not as placid on Thra. Longing, fear, and anger had been stoked by a number of factors, including the charges of Aughra's son, who demanded to know the real reason the UrSkek ended up on Thra. Fearful that they would fail to be purified; anxious that they would be thwarted if the truth became known, and angry that this was all happening just as the Conjunction was at hand, their negative emotions had an unexpected and ill effect on Jennoshim, who, in the throes of the Conjunction, inadvertently began splitting the UrSkeks into distinct light and dark manifestations, the urRu and the Skeksis, the latter of which caused a piece of her to break off.

It would be a much more difficult millennium before they would be reunited with their other selves, a harrowing time in which great evil occurred due to the dark halves. Although the Skeksis at first concealed their corrupted natures, they could not hide it from their light halves or even their offspring, the Halosians, who proved just as devious as their sires, seeking out a different means of leaving Thra.

The first attempt the Halosians made was another unmitigated disaster. Through arcane arts, Charun, eldest of the Halosians, had learned of a labyrinthine realm on Xiccarph in which he could rule as king, but his rival for the seat tricked him into going to another and quite different labyrinth, *one found only in the Charnel Worlds.*

This did nothing to stop the Halosians from continuing to use magic, science, and slave labor to secretly construct a ship, the *Halos-1,* and with it they departed Thra!

Along with their own children, who called themselves the Arakkoa, the Halosians fell in with the armies of the Old Ones and went on to cause trouble in the years ahead, attacking the sapient *Leviathan*-class transports and corrupting the citizens of Gorch (later known as Gorse), many of whom were forced to leave to join their companions in Koozebane, which the Halosians also attacked. But in this they failed and were expelled by the peaceable and united community of Ugnaughts, Rybets, ZeHethbra, Brigians, Brolf, Buzchub, and Croutonians.[125]

Forced to find new homes, the Halosians and Arakkoa eventually established Rakshar ("Sunstone") and an unnamed planet in the UrDur system. As their parents had done before them, their offspring refused to keep their forebear's racial name and customs and identified as Fosians (later Fosh), Carrins, and Targonnians and relocated to Targonn and Terra I. A crossbreed with the Ssi-ruuk became the Chistori.

TASPAN

Taspan was Mistress of the Silex. Those sapient, silica-based crystals dwelt within an electromagnetic substance called meltmassif that could be found in the caves and crust of their world, Taspan II, for which reason the Silex were sometimes called Melters. To their dismay, some would later be taken and transferred to Mindor, Nilrebmah XIII, and Rhand, where they were referred to as Nihil Smokestones.

Taspan often experienced dreamlike visions of strange vistas and odd peoples that she suspected might be memories. She also recalled terrible pain and the sight of a being that she felt was her but could not be due to its horrifying visage and the gloaming malevolence that poured out of it. That was when she gathered with her fellow Crystal Riders to enter and expand *Corundum,* a dimension hidden behind Realspace fashioned by the Earth Elementals and accessed by several silicon-based sapients, including some of their offspring. The partial or permanent residents of this Ethereal Land include:

The Cheniesou of Procion; the Diamant of Mondreux, who retreated into Corundum during the Cosmic Wars and were known as the Taalo; the Kwath (later called the Kurkuoth), an offspring race of the Kwa who fed on the energy sources of enemy ships; the Gutretee, who lived as noble warriors on Isis but entered Corundum when they slept; the Granite Mutores, offspring of the Archetype Elementals who dwelt on Mthura in Corundum; the Keshetakh, who were later called the Rainbow Gems of Gallinore; the Chalsamar, whose appearance, as with the Ecothem, seems to herald disaster; the Crystal Fish, of which scant is known; the Tchorak guardians who'd been driven mad by the incursion of the Kindred; and of late, themselves, lethean crystal outcasts and their exceptional offspring.[126]

When the Empyrean Wars first began, Taspan kept to her wondrous otherworld. Much of her time was spent in tending to her growing Silex and healing, though from what ailment she could not recall, ruminating on the dark visions that she could not

[125] Though they largely failed to defeat the sapient *Leviathan* ships, another race, the Patriqu-ro, were more successful, hiring the Quillus to engineer the Siren Stars that lured *Leviathans* to their doom.

[126] The Korendum crystals found on the gargantuan ghost ship, *Gorgorror,* were harvested from this realm, which caused untold problems for the Jedi Master, his apprentice, and others who came upon it.

quite understand but was curious to discover. Her siblings often shared with each other their chromatic phantasies, puzzling through the mysteries of impossible former lives. As far as they knew, none in the galaxy were aware of them, save for their offspring and the other silicon races with whom they shared Corundum, and it was these who first christened them the Crystal Riders. But of late, there was talk of danger from a being of terrible power known as Typhojem. She felt largely hidden on Taspan II and the Silex kept their "eyes" open for this Typhojem, should he draw near.

For these reasons had she been unaware of having attracted the attention of *others*. The Kindred of Ooradryl had come to Taspan II after being informed of the presence of Taspan and the Silex by spies communicating to them through the Kooroo Shrines on nearby Mindor. After surreptitious probing, they confirmed that, indeed, a being of some unusual power dwelt there… *one they had encountered before!*

Ooradryl, Waru, Uthoqquan, and Nyeegath sought out the Crystal Riders not merely for their own sustenance and pleasure, but to feed their growing offspring!

When Taspan felt their alien minds, she was unable to discern who the transgressors were but knew enough to be alarmed. She left Taspan II to find answers, but at her back and on either side, Ooradryl, Waru, and Uthoqquan followed. Nyeegath remained behind to cut off escape in that direction. When she saw who it was that pursued her—and so awful was her terror that it was felt by all of her siblings. They did not know them either, save for a vague recollection of some nebulous, nightmarish potency. As her pursuers attempted to corral her, she sped up and tried various ways of losing them. But these were no ordinary hunters. Finally, she hid in a region that later became known as the Kollen system and the Region of the Three Warlocks.

The Kindred tightened their formation, honing in on her position. Floating alongside the three entities, at about half their bloated size, churned a misshapen sack of grotesque fleshy matter which bulged and swelled horridly with life. Within that somatic satchel wiggled a thousand of their tiny offspring. Taspan could feel their hunger stretching out to feed. The Old Ones now attached themselves to one another, augmenting their power in order to probe, pummel, and enervate her mind.

She resolved to stand her ground. There was nowhere to run where the Kindred would not follow and they could not be allowed entrance into Corundum. She pushed back. *A futile gesture*, they assured her. On her own, she would be fortunate to fend off just one of these, but three together were unstoppable. Before long, they would learn of the secret world of her kind and thrust their way in. So she went on the offensive and probed back! What she learned was intriguing. It was not just that the Old Ones were hunting a food source, though that was certainly omnipresent in their vastly wicked thoughts. They were motivated by anxiety… Ooradryl, Waru, Uthoqquan, and Nyeegath were near-indestructible; even Typhojem and Thargorograht could not command them. *So what could they possibly have to fear?*

With even this little bit of success, she felt herself gain strength, and she penetrated further until she began to see another entity… a sibling of sorts… wholly hideous beyond description and even fouler and more dangerous than they. This malevolence was referred to as the *Devourer* and the *Sickness*… It was yet trapped. *But for how long? Should this entity ever get loose, no world in the galaxy will survive… And yet, if* their *offspring grew* first, *they would have no need to fear or flee, for they would*

comprise a dominant force in Skyriver, and the sustenance that a realm like Corundum could provide would make them hale enough to devour the Devourer!

It was a bleak outlook. One or the other would come to devastate the galaxy. But one was trapped. As to the brood of the Kindred, they would bring a far slower death. As the objects of devotion in a galaxy-wide cult, they would ensure a food source for eternity; but the galaxy would sour and become akin to the Charnel Worlds.

Taspan would not allow that!

The connection she'd forged with the Kindred came with a price, however, for it gave them temporary access into that crystal domain, and upon glimpsing it, they wasted no time wrestling to overpower and immobilize her with renewed fervor. In short order, she would be offered to their soon-to-be-spawned monstrosities who would suckle on her energies and mind until, after she'd been completely drained like a dewback after a sketto swarm, they'd seek out her offspring in Corundum!

Taspan struggled to release herself from their hold, but the bond was stronger than durasteel. She grew weaker as they drew nearer. A memory flashed then: she *had* been something else! *Someone* else! A protector of a sort. There was no time to puzzle it out. They entered Corundum just as the bulging flesh-sack of ravenous offspring split at the clawing of a thousand immature tendrils reaching out to begin their feast!

Her life-force began to fade, and she feared her efforts had proved too little too late. She'd miscalculated their strength and alacrity. Death was imminent. *You will have to be wise now and strong,* she communicated telepathically to her Silex children, *for I will no longer be able to protect you*.

Her adversaries' glee lasted for but a moment—not nearly long enough—before they realized that something was not quite right. Ooradryl and the Kindred discerned an upswell in her strength. *This cannot be!* they mentally exclaimed. Sensing the anomalous danger, they now attempted to remove their offsprings' hungry feelers from Taspan, but she clung as fiercely to them as they'd previously clung to her, channeling what remaining powers she had along with the energy being infused into her by her fellow Crystal Riders. They had heard her cry and come up with a plan, and now they gave her the strength she needed for one final act!

Taspan pushed out with every fiber of her being, from deep in her core to the furthest of her extremities *and exploded into thousands upon thousands of slivers!* So propulsive was the blast that it offset the magnetic fields of the Kollen system. The Kindred tightened their shields as they were slammed hard and propelled across space. Taspan's miniscule, diamond-like slivers pierced through Ooradryl, Waru, and Uthoqquan, grievously wounding them and shredding many of their infants to nothing.

With whatever progeny they could gather, the Kindred withdrew. Nyeegath aided them in returning to their realm, where it would be some time before they'd recover. They could still access their numerous shrines in order to provide sustenance for themselves and their offspring, but ever they would seek to regain the power they once had, for which reason they began to keep an even closer watch on the comings and goings of their siblings.

It was not the end for the offspring of Ooradryl, for the Kindred had an earlier spawn of whom little is known save from hieroglyphs found in the Temple of Shadows, for as with all of their progeny, he had been kept secret. His name was

Pnygatheem, and he is said to have glided through the atmosphere like the great eels above the ocean floor. In the gloaming near lonely villages he would float, whispering hymns more poignant than the songs of the Vors'… sweet psalms of perpetual summers and morphic oceans of dream… evil songs that brought him down to feast on the misery of the entranced. It is said that Pnygatheem yet rules over the frozen ossuary-world of dim Yumar where deep under the heaving crust the seeds of his sires grow, their long proboscises reaching up to feed on the juices of the dead.

As to the other surviving offspring of the Kindred, they would grow slowly over time as they fed on the alms of their procreators, expanding their corpulent, anfractuous bodies and minds until they cast off to sail the stars as Space Grazers—so called by those who no longer believed the horrors and wonders of the Cosmic Wars. These lethal entities, different in form and function from those who'd spawned them, grew so large that they began to feed on the life-force of worlds and suns, seeking those that dwelt within. And so they brought upon themselves the attention of the Elemental Overlords: Beautiful Aenna, Queen of the Waters, steadfast in purity; Fiery Epothos, Warrior of the Rising Sun and volatile guardian of the sacred flame; Devious Durlock, Master of Metals and Lord of Stone, keeper of earth's secrets; and Wicked Helamis, Queen of Storms and Chaos, mother of hurricanes, leaving havoc in her wake. In the centuries following the War of Temporal Planes, the four managed to wipe out the vast majority of the Space Grazers before turning on each other, infected by the madness of war.

There was one offspring who was not so foolish as his siblings but clever like his progenitors. Called Athla'giroth, the World Razer, he would be coveted by the Sith and worshipped by the Esh-kha as the Eater of Stars and Destroyer of Worlds.

THE DUST OF THE DEAD AND BANDO GORA

Little known to most, some of the offspring of the Kindred had survived beneath the surface of Kollen's planet and moons, feeding off the natives that lived there and sampling the dust from the shards that were the remains of Taspan, and this granted them power. These tentacled serpentine beings would be called the Yugg, after the Father of Serpents, and to aid in their growth, they began to lure beings from afar.

Prospectors came in the thousands from across the galaxy. They had felt the call or heard rumors of precious crystals. Even the dust from the shattered remnants scattered about the unstable planet and its moons was sought after, for it soon became known that it produced psychic and psychotropic effects. In service to the Yugg, some worked as builders, constructing great temples to their masters, while some sought their wealth through less honorable means or the betrayal of their fellow sapients.

But many of the prospectors perished in the hunt for crystal and spice, and the moon of Kohlma was converted to a graveyard world that was steadily being covered in tombs. So the name of the Kollen system was altered to Bogden to be less offputting to potential buyers. Still, those eager for riches continued to come unabated.

In response, the Brooin and Teroda natives set up a rival federation, hiring the Rafa giants of Solay to fight for them against the growing influence of crystal hunters, spice collectors, and the Yugg. When the wealthier criminal enterprises began hiring conscripts, the Yugg turned their thralls into warriors, sending them against their

rivals, and this now included rival Yugg, which led to savage armies engaging in full-scale wars that seemed to rage incessantly across the system.

This would continue down to the Alsakan Conflicts, though the Brooin and Teroda would no longer be the same. Vast consumption of the costly spice, now called Dust, eventually cost them their minds, and worse, it cost their later generations their sapience. The Brooin are now known as Renda Bears whereas the Teroda became the Terrodaak, some of which now serve on Kohlma as Guardians of the Moon of the Dead.

Many millennia later, after the shards of Taspan were long gone and the spice dried up, in the days after the Yugg had passed into legend and only a few of their temples still stood, Bogden and its moons became a haven for pirates and criminals.

The Terrodak yet protected Kohlma, but they were unable to stop the body snatchers hired by Count Gora of Serenno (a descendent of Xander Gora), who reasoned that the temperature and arid conditions of that world would be ideal for preserving traces of that ancient commodity which might be found in sufficient quantities within the costlier tombs, within the wizened bodies that lay mouldering in their saturnine crypts. From these might the precious Dust be extracted.

Unfortunately for Count Gora, the Satabs of Ventooine had learned of it as well, and they paid the grave robbers considerably more to bring the exhumed cadavers to them instead. And from the dead, they successfully extracted, synthesized, and trademarked their infamous version that is known to this day as Sansanna spice.

Thinking they could yet make a fortune by doing it themselves, the grave robbers returned to Kohlma to unearth more bodies. Using what equipment they could steal or purchase from the wages the Satabs had paid them, they set up a tent in which they went about siphoning the spice from the ages-old carcasses. To ensure that what they'd distilled was indeed potent, they each consumed it… *and were forever lost*.

The spice enhanced their strength and gave them mild psionic abilities, but the Dust and their proximity to an old and dying Yugg beneath the moon's crust put them in that creature's power. Seeing an opportunity for revenge, the entity called out to several other sleeping serpents across the system. No longer rivals, they aligned their consciousness and poured their remaining life-force into the body snatchers, turning their skin to a hideous mosaic and their eyes to a glowing red or blue, all the while funneling their mental prowess into the strongest amongst them, those who would lead as High Priests and Captains. Such bodies were strange to the Yugg at first, but they would soon grow accustomed to their workings. Fashioning masks from the skulls of the Terrodaak and Horned Lizards that attacked the walking abominations, they forged holo-prod staffs that focused their energy into green spheres of fire.

They went forth furtively, calling themselves the Bando Gora. Their first stop was Bogden. After taking back the Temples of Yugg from the shapeshifting Bandor guards, who recognized their old masters, they established a center of power on Kohlma. Then, they marched in deadly array to the pirates and criminals spread out in various pockets across the system. To more quickly increase their followers, their leaders employed their powers of suggestion as well as a spice they now termed *Bog*. Their operations on Kohlma grew as they exhumed more of the dead, harvesting and replicating the drug and other spice variants. Any pirate who refused or proved immune to their power was killed, setting an example for any who might think to resist. Once their numbers

grew to a formidable extent, they sent armed forces into the Outer Rim to make disciples and take control of the galaxy's powerful industries.

Events finally came to a head when the Jedi apprentice of Count Dooku, Komari Vosa, was abducted while trying to stop the Bando Gora. Tortured and turned to the Dark Side, she killed her captors and took control of the Bando Gora as their High Priestess. But control over the Outer Rim was one thing. The Core was another. Vosa's high-profile activities, including a failed plot to kill Hego Damask, Chairman of the IBC, brought them to the attention of Darth Sidious, who could tolerate no rival. He ordered his apprentice, Darth Tyranus, to kill Vosa and dismantle the Bando Gora.

CARNEL AND CORNUS

Embedded as they were in the cores of a planet and its sun in the far-off Dreighton system, Carnel and Cornus believed themselves safe from Typhojem, and so they had rejected the advice of their sisters regarding any aid that Cold Danda Sine might provide. "What are these Architects but wild beings we know little of?" they said amongst themselves. And what they had heard had not engendered trust in them.

Not much was known of the living cinnabar crystals that resided within these spheres, save that they were powerfully bonded to one another. Despite their cautionary nature, they wished to use their abilities to provide some small measure of help to a galaxy in pain. So, under the guise of natural processes, Carnel imparted healing to those who spent time on her world while those who bathed in the light of Cornus at the tops of Mounts Kora or Kaila gained mental acuity.

But with so many coming to these worlds, Typhojem's spies grew suspicious. A terror-force arrived to uncover these secrets. And *he* led it! With the words of the Architects in mind and the power of the Sun Dragon within, he peered deeper: there they were—two pulsating crystalline entities, one within the sun and one inside the planet.

Typhojem focused his efforts on Carnel, as that would be the easier Crystal Rider to extract. Not wanting to risk the destruction of the chalcedony crystals as his foolish cognates had done with Taspan, he used greater caution in the extraction, calling forth the Caustic Borers to begin the process of digging tunnels into the core. This group included Miners' Horrors, Flint Feeders, Nadir Spiders, and Thanu.[127]

The carnellian crystals now knew they had been wrong in thinking they could escape what had come upon their siblings and the galaxy. But there was no time for self-recrimination, and they straightaway went into action.

For Carnel, it was easy to take over the minds of the Nadir Spiders, using them to prey upon their comrades instead. That worked for a time, but when it was discovered and the problem solved by replacing them with Garcors, Cornus responded by drawing closer to her mate, a delicate process that charred and eradicated all of their threats. Or so they thought, for they did not understand the unyielding nature of Typhojem!

[127] Thanu were later re-engineered into Stone Mites and Karack metallites, both of which escaped their labs and spread into the galaxy.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

CYCLES OF THE DAMNED

SECTION I: WARRIORS OF THE DEEP

Amongst the races that saw the greatest success in fending off the depredations of the Enemy, the aquatic ones had proved formidable. Their terrains were vast and the marine denizens knew them well, but more significant was their communal bond, for the less common pelagic Precursor races ensured they maintained a strong society.

Daritha Trayus of the Shadow Council was now Supreme Potentate of the Sith, a position won after opening the earliest academy of sorcery on Malachor V and strengthening Drômencas' reign over Kashi Mer, Malachor, Thule, and the allied worlds in the Stygian Caldera. Now hellbent on securing the northern quadrant for Typhojem, he called upon the associates of the Sith Empire to go to battle. This included the scorpion-like Tervigs, who were a Chiggnash offshoot; the warmongering Fenelar, who were proficient armorers and shipwrights; the stout and hot-tempered Shusugaunt Samurai; the arachnoid Tlönians, not long ago spun on the looms of Gorog; and hunting packs of unflagging Nogs.

But apart from securing a bastion for their forces in the north, Trayus now targeted the waterworlds. Despite the devastating attacks made against them in the Empyrean Wars (including the ruination of Frix's sun), the aquatic peoples had rarely been defeated, for which reason Lord Trayus knew he would be awarded great prestige for succeeding where others had failed.

With the impending threat of another war on the horizon, Adikar, monarch of the Firstborn Dur Sabon and a cunning strategist, formed a separate aquatic assembly outside of the Conclave of the Firstborn. Called the Council of the Deep, it was led by himself, Kithnarrock of the Firstborn Arrak, sometimes called Leviathans, and Protas of the Firstborn Kharubdian. Seeing it as a committee of war, however, many refused to join, coining them the "Warriors of the Deep," which is a name that stuck.

The Warriors of the Deep gathered on Aquilaris. Amongst them were representatives of many of the thalassic races, including the Iyra, Frid, Duor, Sulituan, Whaladon, Uroth, Inleshat, Priapulin, Mon Cala, Nejma, Quarren, Sauvax, Aqualish, Ploven, Karkarodon, Nautolan, Dornean, Lazhuwan, Sedrian, Akwin, Draeden, Battrach, Porporite, Anselmi, Swimming People, Qwohog, Neelabi, Wrean (known also as the Wreed), Zeffliffl, Anguilla (known also as the Uteen), Tibrin (later known as the Ishi Tib), Tulkun, Sorki, Herglic, and many more besides the amphibious offspring races of the Pan-preneur and Hysalrians. However, the Aryellans, an aquatic offshoot of the Osserians, remained deaf to all outside pleas.

Whereas the Rybets, Povanarians, and Hynerians of the Hysalrians were quite dissimilar, the Pan-preneur created some of their races with analogous traits to strengthen their unity despite the disparate environments they were intended for. These encompassed the Zarians of Zaria, who'd broken off from the Zarrians of Aelios (which they called Xentilx); the Chubbits of Aridus; the Throgs of Nasika; and the Chanchu of Anura, who started the Toad Empire and became the Vernol of Garnib. As to the Zedam of Galtea, they'd been divided ever since their leaders began to serve Typhojem. Disparaged as "Alfoids" for following the ideology of the Alfar (their word for the Sephi), the dissenters embraced the name when they later colonized and coined Alfestril.

Highly valued by the Council and present only through their representatives were those known as the Hydresians, who were the Water Elementals. Those that chose to participate at this time were called the Clandestine Ones. They encompassed the Solax of Solanus (previously known as Solaris); the Cyax of Da Soocha; the Aurum of Sedri (called the Golden Sun by the Sedrians); the Tridacna of Perilix; the Pakoukou of Dac (known as the Knowledge Bank) and her sisters: the Panikiki of Paulking XIV and the Algosus of Cygnus B. Also included were the Moappa, who governed the Medosleans, and their sister, Moanna, who was called the Colony Creature of Dac.

The Mer People, spawned from the interbreeding of aquatic or amphibious races with Humans, became a subject of considerable controversy, with Queen Severina of the Karkarodon leaving the Council over it. Of the Mer races, the Chuhkyvi of Aquaris came from the Inleshat of Leshan (who were themselves an offspring race of the Pulrista of Lish from the Demar system); the Ab'bai of Abba came from the Mere of Maramere; and the Blubreen of Plooriod III came from the Qwohog of Hirsi.[128]

Those that supported Queen Severina pointed to the fact that the Melodies of Yavin 8 had been spawned by the Sith. The opposition replied that many of their people had broken free of their evil masters, but this argument was countered by the fact that some yet sung the siren songs of the Sith beneath the frigid waters of Yavin 8.

Putting the ambitious Serp in charge (whom Lord Trayus disparagingly called Lizard Men), Trayus sent to the Outer Rim Waterworlds giant Spinax, Beck-tori, Drugon, Miridon, Narkaa, Salerodrex, Twenchok, Chiaki, Aquatic Gundarks, Tenticulon, Mamacore, Opee Sea Killers, Camray Eels, Zoun Maulers, Fluggrians, Kon'me, Krikthasi, Demonsquid, Demonsharks, and the vicious Ibliton. To Sol he sent the Aquaphibians, who had just shattered the Glass City of Zofeit, and their Terror Fish. Trayus himself departed for Pria. Of the Old Ones came Alththamin'eshr, who was the mate of Noga Mak'tu and father of the Altathat race, the Ibdis Maw, and Dianoga before coming to Manaan.

King Adikar deployed various units to defend those aquatic systems that needed it most. With the Whaladon and Moappa protecting Dac from the Krakana and Amphi-Hydrus, the telepathic Pakoukou and Aurum received instructions from the Arrak of

[128] The Drallish Mermaid was a kind of dugong brought to Drall when that world was first formed. The Taï of Taypho, Sorkis of Serob 6, and Draeden did not breed with Humans in this era. The Coralians were a Sephi-Human offshoot that used technology to breathe in the oceans of Mongo.

the Sulphis system to have the Quarren, Mon Calamari, Battrach, Qwohog, Taï, Tibrin, Dorneans, and Sedrians join with the Dur Sabon, Tulkun, and Kharubdians to lead cephalopods, terrapin, cnidarians, rays, and sharks against the pelagic monstrosities of Illathurion terrorizing the many underwater inhabitants of Skyriver. Utilizing the sea gates and Oswaft allies, their mission was a successful first part of the defense of the oceanic worlds.

Trayus contemplated his failure, bitterly admitting he'd forsaken the meaning of his name; to traject with lethal precision, as the true archer must, required stealth, foresight, and a vital weakpoint with which to mortally fell one's foes.

Now riding within the enormous bioelectric parasol of an Aqua Bloater, he approached Queen Severina of the Karkarodon and convinced her to join their cause in exchange for Aquilaris and the Sanbra sector. Greedily accepting his offer, she returned to the Council, claiming to have too hastily judged the Mer People. After graciously being welcomed back, she used her position to feed reports to Trayus.

The brutality of the Serp and their newly enslaved Hortek thralls began to turn the tide. Now, in collaboration with Sith Wizards and fellow Ecclesiasts of the Ninûshwodzakut—Daritha Kilwins, a Draethos; Daritha Fractalus, a pureblood; and Daritha Nt'tossh, a Siniteen—Trayus unleashed the Phobis Magnacrons into the seas of Pelagon, Eriscot, Jarsatt, Sonn Vilmari, and Dellalt. These sinister-looking devices worked by amplifying fear and panic within the weapons' triangulated field of psyche-annihilation, allowing the undersea inhabitants to more easily be captured or killed. Trayus personally arranged for the transfer of the Phobis Magnacrons to the depths of Pria where it targeted the Priapulin colonies. The Shadow Harvester, however, would kill anything within a nine-thousand-kilometer radius.[129]

As with the Sluissi, the Priapulin were offspring of the Hysalrians. They were also amongst the greatest of the aquatic warriors and had been in the process of defeating the Opee-riding Serp when the shockwaves of the Shadow Harvester were first felt. Trayus exclaimed aloud, believing his victory at hand. But he'd not counted on the tenacity, bravery, and wit of the Warriors of the Deep, a miscalculation that left him unprepared for what came next.

Queen Severina had been unaware that Algosus, the sapient algae beds of Cygnus B, could move about independently. Her sudden return to the Council had been met with suspicion, and some had her and her officers followed. When, consequently, they were discovered to be traitors, the aquatic allies used it against their adversaries and were prepared when the top-secret superweapons arrived!

Now, the Kwazel Maw tore through the waters, and at their side, other great sea creatures thrashed and ripped apart the Phobis Magnacrons! Moanna devoured the guards while the Zeffliffl penetrated the Shadow Harvester, causing interior damage that prevented its turbolasers from functioning. The shockwaves Lord Trayus had felt

[129] Jarsatt was plunged into an ice age. The Arkanians would later hide an early cloning lab in its frozen wastes, though their attempts to replicate Force-sensitives were thwarted by the Midichlorians, resulting in deformed and aggressive aberrations that forced them to abandon their experiments.

were from the destruction of the Shadow Harvester, which served as the signal for the allied forces of the Council of the Deep to surge upon their adversaries alongside giant varieties of squid, triggerfish, eels, rays, puffers, wrasses, lionfish, dragonets, stars, scorpionfish, jellies, and more to overwhelm the oppressors on all the aquatic worlds.

The seas of the waterworlds ran red with the blood of their enemies that day!

For her role in the affair, Queen Severina was shredded into pieces by her people and left for the foragers and bottom feeders.

As to the remaining abyssopelagic creatures of the Enemy, they fled back to their worlds in Illathurion, hid in the depths of the seas, or suffered retribution. Even the vicious Urluquai, the malevolent, luminescent floaters of Ooradryl who are sustained on fear and death, were nigh exterminated by the surging Swimming People of Dellalt. Trayus just escaped being drowned by a troop of Sedrians, Akwin, and Draedens—who tore and chewed apart his entire legion—when he came upon the translucent Sorkis whose intense mental projections drove him insane. It would have been better for him had he died there. Instead, he lived long enough to be sent to Malachor V, where he was tortured and replaced with Mhu'anThul. His spirit is yet said to haunt his academy there.

Spawned on accursed Xoth, where he was known to the Zanibar he governed by a different name, Mhu'anThul bore the head of an enormous Tyrannosaur with a mane of tentacles. The Dweller in the Depths was less overtly ambitious and more patient and cunning than his predecessor. With the information Queen Severina had earlier passed on to Daritha Trayus, Mhu'anThul unleashed a wave of deadly toxins into each of the oceanworlds upon which a leader of the Council of the Deep dwelt, intending their deaths to demoralize and punish the Warriors of the Deep. Targets included King Adikar on Akvarium, Protas on Jerrilek, Kithnarrock on Arrakan, and King Pelagius, who'd been recently elevated to the Council on Leshan.

The poison failed to reach Arrakan, as the Force-sensitive Duors felt a disturbance and warned their Battrach offspring to intercept the Sith vessel carrying it. The brilliant Battrach repelled the ship into the whirling tornadoes that made up their atmosphere where it was destroyed.

Tragically, it was one of the few victories:

- Toxins devastated Leshan, Jerrilek, and Akvarium, killing many of their inhabitants. The remnant of Inleshat relocated to Drexel II, once a Human world until gross mismanagement saw their polar ice caps melt.
- Protas and most of his people escaped Jerrilek.
- Though word reached Adikar via the Teezl, his world contained numerous inhabitants whom he refused to leave until the last survivor was safely away. He perished saving the final few. Akvarium would be renamed Adikaria in honor of him.

But Mhu'anThul's tactics had the opposite effect than intended. Additional races such as the Ootoolans, Multupos, Rybets, Trulalis, and others—incensed by the poisoning of these worlds—joined the Warriors of the Deep. Incessantly would they harass their would-be oppressors for the duration of the war, using hit-and-fade assaults to keep them off-balance and unable to commit to other fronts.

Even after Mhu'anThul consolidated various scattered worlds under his command in the Malachor and Drômencas systems, utilizing the Dark Nest in an attempt to create unassailable redoubts, he struggled to gain traction in the larger field of battle.

But success rarely came without cost. The Multupos were beset by the aggressive mollusk race of Krikthasi, who had been sent by the Night Queen to conquer Baralou. The Trulalis were cruelly split in two by their misuse of a stolen Tsil crystal, which turned them into the Issori and Odenji races, a fate that was sealed when they destroyed the crystal, thinking that would restore them. The Aqualish were induced to fight amongst their subspecies—the Quara, Ualaq, and Aquala—on Ando. So too with the Rybet who engaged in a battle of the sexes (which went into mandatory abeyance every ten years so they could procreate). The Anselmi of Glee Anselm were infected with a disease engineered to kill batrachian races. As it had not affected the Nautolans, the Anselmi came to resent them, and years later, after catastrophic tidal waves destroyed their empire, they moved to dominate them.

Ages hence, during the Great Hyperspace War, the Arrak and Dur Sabon would again come to the aid of their aquatic offspring. Sith Lord Ku'ar Danar threatened to poison the oceanic homes of several aquatic races that he suspected might hold the location of the hidden Pakoukou, whom he intended to devour in a ritual that would grant him telepathic mastery over all beings. With the aid of yet extant Hypergates on Arrakan, Aquilaris, and Dur Sabon, the Quarren, Mon Cala, Dorneans, Ootoolans, Battrachs, and others were able to fend off his forces while transporting refugees from half a dozen worlds to Iskalon, a planet concealed in the Trans-Nebular sector, where they were welcomed by its friendly natives. Though the extermination intended for most of these worlds never came to pass after Danar was betrayed by Naga Sadow, many of the immigrants, including several Quarren, chose to stay on Iskalon in peace. Henceforth, the Quarren warrior-caste would be known as the Kokad on Dac and oceans abroard, and because of their resemblance to the Starspawn of Typhojem, many would choose to remain in their cities under the seas.

SECTION II: DIASPORA

THE CARAVAN OF CYRANNIS

1950-1970 NE

A thousand years of war had ended. And a new one now began.

The cybernetic Sobekk, now known as the Xylan (or Xylon[130]), declared vengeance against the Humans and turned their sights to war against the twelve worlds of the Cyrannis System, unaware they'd made a devil's bargain, as it was again Count Eosforos who led them there. The end would have come sooner for the Cobollian progeny had not the Xylan also been engaged in deadly skirmishes with client races of the Old Ones and the Firstborn, but it came nonetheless in betrayal and genocide.[131]

[130] In the Sobekk alphabet, cresh and xesh are one in the same, while aurek and osk are used interchangeably, for which reason there are some who believe the game sabacc was named by or for the Sobekk.

[131] Among its dozen worlds, only the survivors of Tauron adapted and evolved due to the mysterious experiments performed on their ancestors by the Arilou.

But in this, the Count had also a hand, for in his guise as the wealthy industrialist, Count Ibaulis, he'd been manipulating a Human politician for years to betray his people. It had proven the easiest of his many tasks.

In the midst of cataclysm, a remnant managed to escape in a caravan of over two hundred civilian ships led by a great capital warship and warriors who were dedicated to protecting them. Although hunted across space, they trusted in the aid of the Diathim Seraphs whose teachings they'd encoded in sacred scrolls. The Caravan of Cyrannis went on to have numerous escapades and do much good in their time, stopping the malevolent Apshaidians; following signs and portents to Cobol; freeing the Sephi colony of Acmarans from the false Volahd; ending the Okaati threat in the Empyrean Reach; collapsing the Canopus wormhole near Tessida before the Xylan could traverse it to invade Sol; and preventing a devastating nuclear war between descendants of their people on Terra II. In one area only did the heroes fall short: they failed to fully eradicte the Somnians of Illathurion.

Over fifteen hundred years after their formation, the Universal Alliance had split into two competing factions, the Eastern Alliance and Western Nationalists, with the former causing the destruction of one of their moons. Peace between the authoritarian Eastern Alliance and independent Western Nationalists on Terra II would prove transient. When forces from the Xylan Empire attacked, the neofascist Eastern Alliance succeeded in driving them away, emboldening them to resume war for two more decades until the Caravan of Cyrannis returned—this time from Trammis III, where they'd awakened the heir of the eldest Cobol Lord. His lineage and the destructive capabilities of his *Ark* ship made an impression, decisively bringing the war to an end.

Wishing to forge a saner government, the Western Nationalists brought the best minds from both societies to restore civilization to what it had been before. And in the centuries following this conflict, the world governments that emerged in succession were the Earth Republic, the Federated Territories, and the Earthservice.

Long before then, the Caravan of Cyrannis had moved on. It would take them near upon three decades and the discovery of a mysterious and powerful child to locate the last vestiges of their ancestral people, the lost Thirteenth Colony, on Terra I.

EXPERIMENT ON TERRA I

1980 NE

By the time the Caravan of Cyrannis found them, civilization on Terra I was at the cusp of a technological revolution. The Caravan sent a discreet squad of Colonial Warriors to help bring their defenses to the point where they could fend off the coming Xylan Empire. But Terra I was not culturally mature enough to handle advanced weaponry. Few citizens—distracted as they were in the bourgeois banality of a consumerist system—even knew that their world was mired in an ancient and secret conspiracy to dominate or destroy them. And the Xylan Empire had expanded to a Xylan Alliance consisting of organic client species deemed useful for the time, such as the insectoid Ovion and shapeshifting Skafraxian. The Xylan had also mechanically evolved, first with the Mark III model, until—with advancements developed from stolen Paradeen android tech—they looked and behaved Human. But their

greatest weapons were the planet-sized Exterminator Droids, which they'd constructed in secret, one hundred and seven, as per their master's instructions.

The Caravan, however, had secret weapons of their own. The spiritual son of a Seraph and one of their beloved lost warriors arrived with an army of rebel Xylan who'd forsaken their genocidal leaders for a new sovereign: a fellow android who'd learned the truth of their enslavement and joined with the Humans to fight back.

What was called the Second Coming kicked off with two major events. The arrival of the Exterminator Droids, the very presence of which proved soul-crushing to the Caravan until the first model turned his glowing eyes to the largest of the Xylan battleships and said, "We were not made for such petty battles but for the Final War to come," and disappeared, one hundred into Illathurion and seven into different parts of the galaxy. The second major event was the arrival of the seraphic Ships of Light, which was devastating to the already demoralized Xylan forces. Side by side with their erstwhile enemies, the Caravan of Cyrannis waged what was for them the Final Battle and wiped out the Xylan Empire in a resounding defeat.

To forestall attacks from any remnant that might yet be out in the galaxy, the Caravan of Cyrannis went forth, no longer as the pursued but as Defenders; their mission: to find other Human colonies scattered amongst the stars and protect innocents from the evils of the age.

THE CALL OF COBOL

Circa 1951-1971 NE

During Terra II's recent war between the Eastern Alliance and Western Nationalists, a large convoy made up of hundreds of vessels opted to leave, a move that echoed the exodus from Terra II in the days of the Universal Alliance War. Led by some of the descendants of the Thirteenth Colony who'd been raised on the millennia-old stories of the halcyon days of Cobol, they brought with them engineers and entrepreneurs entranced by rumors of the treasures that had been left behind on that world.

After arriving on that abandoned Earthworld, they took little note of the fact that it was considerably more pristine than any had anticipated. With their considerable knowledge and technical skills, they soon brought about a great society, going so far as to adopt the quaint model of the twelve nations they'd read about in Cobol's historical records, prompting them to change its name to an even older forebear.

None knew what to think when some of them began having dreams, nightmares, and visions. As these individuals began to connect with others who shared similar experiences, they realized that their dreams seemed to have meaning and served as pieces to a larger puzzle. These visions foresaw a second calamity on Cobol but also, somewhere at the edge of the galaxy, a haven, an enchanted world to which they felt called. This fantastic world appeared on no star charts, nor could it be accessed by means of any known gate, which meant that part of the journey would have to be made navigating the treacherous seas of space.

One of the head engineers, Sidharth Daikin, had fallen in love with one of the heads of the Dreamers Project, as it was called. Her name was Natali Asana, and from

her he first learned of their plans. Daikin had the backing of the Chengwei Corp, who would provide the capital and organization to make such a journey feasible.

Daikin also believed that the communal vision of the Dreamers was no coincidence and that their coordinates could be relied upon. Although Karl Sandeni—the other head of the Dreamers Project—argued against the inclusion of the Chengwei, fearing their true motives were rooted in exploitation, Natali argued that without their backing, it would take decades to raise the capital to afford such a journey.

So did the voyage to the galactic edge—and *Andowyne*—begin!

SECTION III: THE VEIL FOLK OF ANDOWYNE

FALL OF THE FATES

Despite their many bad examples, Humans had not all succumbed to evil, and many proved to have a core spiritual nature that was peaceable, fiercely loyal, and compassionate, as evidenced in the accounts of those who'd traveled to the Kathol Rift and been aided in finding and settling upon the Sacred World of Andowyne.

Andowyne was the world of the Veil Folk, the word given to the many races thought to be the stuff of legend. The Sacred Worlds were so-called for a reason. As with Ravaath, Andowyne was kept separate from the galaxy, cloaked and protected from the prying eyes of the Enemy, for it was the stepping-stone to the Realms Beyond, a place where the Circles of the World, Flesh, and Spirit overlapped.

It was said that this world was a microcosm for the much larger macrocosm that was the galaxy and that the events that played out here served as a prophetic template from which the Valdilar might learn and understand how best to guide and preserve life on the worlds of Skyriver in the ages yet to come.

It was from Andowyne that the Fāta first manifested in the galaxy, for which reason it was called the Mother World (Ravaath being the Father World). Known by some as the Tün-dérek or Peri, the Fāta were more commonly regarded as the Fae, Fay, or Faerie, as they are the partly incarnate forms of the Valdilar, though most in the galaxy do not believe in their existence or assume they are a Precursor race (as they thought of the Diathim at one time).

Andowyne was guarded by Queen Cherlindrea, who served over Greater Faery, and King Tyrrel, who served over Lesser Faery; it was further protected from inner and outer space by the Duinuogwuin, who had come at their behest.

The division of the Veil Folk, who are their offspring, into "Greater" and "Lesser" Faery, denoted stature and age, not class, though this distinction would be lost in the centuries and millennia ahead.

Greater Faery signified the tall and lithe Firstborn race of the Sephi known on Andowyne, as in ancient days, as the Elves.

Lesser Faery signified the diminutive and wary races who kept themselves hidden and insular on worlds such as Andowyne, Thra, Lesser Tana, Mu-Ab, Garban, Vjun, Sagar and similarly forested worlds, for which reason they were sometimes regarded as mythical. These included Nelwyn, Patitites or Brownies, the seafaring Wyrrn, and the various

Agee, Dryads, Gnomes, Mostlaa, Naiads, Nords, Nymphs, Rindians, and Sprites. Others types of Lesser Faery were comprised of the Lexlar, Gruenak, Gelflings, Firelings, Ylvan, and Ragoons, the latter four of which are Sephi offspring.[132]

The Malevoiy was the name given to those Fāta who'd turned vulterine in the years after they'd crossed over, for they loathed the coming of Man into what they believed would be an empyreal sanctuary, with veiled hints in dusty tomes noting that this chink in their armor had been exploited by the very same sinister intelligences who'd tainted the Titans.

Irrespective of the long reach of the Shadow Kings, the fall of the Malevoiy belongs to them alone, for in feverish passion did they stake their claim—not for power but for the casting off of all moral bounds to sate a never-ending lust for debased diversions. The Malevoiy saw Andowyne and the galaxy as a kind of playground, an invented fantasia in which nothing was real and they could do as they pleased, and what pleased them best was to indulge in their darkest desires. So they sabotaged the Fāta Māchina they'd been tasked to guard on Samarra, after which they sought to corrupt Lesser Fairy with spells and whispers from the deep places and hidden portals.

Eventually, some were apprehended and brought forth before the Fāta, at which time the Malevoiy argued, "Who is troubled with morality in the midst of shatar? Who grieves the fate of pawns, rooks, bishops, and kings, save as it affects the outcome of their game? Good and evil are but a fool's construct in Skyriver. *We* have seen the truth. What is this so-called *Circle of the World* if not a vast and virtual estate upon which to make sport? What is Skyriver if not the greatest arena ever fashioned?"

In punishment, they were stripped of their status as Valdilar and removed from the Circle of the Spirit. So that they could not spread their evil, the Malevoiy were imprisoned on Andowyne and cast in grotesque physical forms. But the Fāta would not restrict them further, for they'd been told that these dark spirits would serve a purpose, for they could bring no harm to any on Andowyne, save those that paid heed to their voices.

The Malevoiy vowed then to make enticement and predation their primary occupation and pleasure. Employing what few servants they had to find and procure for them the Forbidden Books of the Ethereal, the Malevoiy learned to circumvent their restraints and alter their appearance.

When the dismal towers were raised within the extinct volcano of the Northern Waste of Nockmaar, west of the Poha Lands, north of Tir Asleen, the Malevoiy sent an invitation to the races of Andowyne to come and receive gifts. With the illusory forms of the tall, shining Elves of Greater Faery, they offered titles and crowns to any who would come to dwell within their province. This was accompanied by a single, seductive lie: "Cherlindrea and her ilk are hiding a terrible secret."

This lie was based on a truth, as the most seductive lies are, but few are they who deign to dig beneath the surface to uncover that most prized of possessions.

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[132] The Gruenak, not to be confused with Grues or Gruemors, are properly known as *Grünak*, the "Young Ones," and are a sister race of the Kitonak and Makrak; all of whom were created by the Asogians.

VISIONS OF PARADISE

In the Vision of Cherlindrea, Humans had been shown to be the answer to the coming darkness. And so a large convoy now exited Cobol to explore a vision they'd been granted of a paradise world at the edge of the galaxy. They were nearly there.

When this was discovered at the Court of Tir Asleen, Cherlindrea was pressed to reveal her vision and subsequent actions. Friends and enemies alike were aghast at her audacity and seeming abandonment of all good sense. Whether openly or in whispers, they asked, *What foolishness has driven the Queen of the Fāta to violate our world in this way? To pollute it with Humans? Are not the Malevoiy trouble enough?*

Queen Cherlindrea tried to explain that she'd merely been discreet so as not to cause undue disturbance and that the callings granted by the Whills were not to be discounted, for they spoke the Will of the Supreme Maker, but it all fell on deaf ears.

To assuage the apprehensions of Greater and Lesser Faery, the Queen announced, "I shall grant you a compensatory boon. I shall grant you a realm of your own wherein you might live in an enclosed land just beyond the veil. It shall be as a reflection of the lost worlds of the Earliest Days, a small dimension partly within the Circle of the Spirit akin and adjacent to the Realm of Dream that we'd opened to the bereaved Star Dragons. Here is a rare opportunity to live in one or both. By way of the World Gates you may pass to and fro and across Andowyne. But to ensure that no violence is brought into this sanctified land, a condition is placed on all Veil Folk who wish to travel or dwell there: henceforth, you will be imbued with an innate aversion to iron and forged steel. Your own blood will repel and curdle at its touch. So will the consecrated lands be kept free of the weapons of war."

All but the Nelwyn agreed to this, for they resented the fact that the High Elves were excluded from this provision on account of the fact that they were the foremost adversaries of the Malevoiy and would have to protect Lesser Faery.

The World Gates on Andowyne differed from other gates in the galaxy. They were made by the Valdilar to serve a dual-purpose: to access the twelve Great Realms on Andowyne, but also to allow the Valdilar passage to and from the realms beyond the veil. The World Gates were erected in certain places to be powered by the living energy that passes along intersecting points in the land and sky. This was done to ensure that with the passage of time and the movement of those points, the gates would cease to function, for they'd had a foregleam of what was to come upon the galaxy and so ensured that none could pass into the Sacred Worlds that did not belong there.

The Malevoiy wasted no time exploiting the situation. "Clearly, we were right to suspect Cherlindrea!" they announced one day to any who'd listen. "She and her ilk have secretly been in league with Humans and Demons, and their *gift* is nothing but a gilded cage." Repeated enough, this lie came to be believed, for on many worlds are found avaricious ones willing to use all manner of chicanery to achieve their desires, just as there are those with dark hearts willing to be deceived by such ones.

Those who remained loyal to Cherlindrea were furious at the falsehoods that their own brethren had come to believe and their unwillingness to listen to reason, and in a relatively short time it led to division amongst the races of Lesser Faery.

THE GREAT HUNT

For their part, Cherlindrea and Tyrrel traveled through the gates, visiting each of the kingdoms of their world, teaching and exposing the lies of their fallen siblings, explaining that Humans were now a part of the fabric of the universe and the means by which evil would be driven off Andowyne. But for those living in Nockmaar, twisted less by sorcery than by sorcerous words and manipulative fabrications that appealed to their pride and stoked their fears, the King and Queen of Faery were witless pawns at best and corrupt elites at worst. It mattered not that Andowyne had room to spare or that the Humans that had come were, by and large, peace-loving—only that they were outsiders and infidels. And though it bothered the people of Nockmaar that they alone knew the truth, they were confident that their masters, to whom they pledged loyalty, would handle matters.

Initially, the Humans minded their own affairs, building their homes and cities and spreading out across the face of the world. The Chengwei were the first to form a nation. Tradition-bound, patriarchal, magic-obsessed, artistic, but also militaristic, they could not have been more different than the freebooters and former slaves of the Sandeni, the nobles and traders that made up Angwyn, or, for that matter, the cavaliers, poets, philosophers, and craftsmen that came to dwell in Tir Asleen.

The conflicts of the strange natives were not their concern, and most Humans avoided trafficking with them. Yet as curiosity got the better of both peoples, so did the Veil Folk begin to forge friendships with the Human tribes, who at this time they called the "Daikini" after the prominent Daikin clan. For those of Lesser Faery, who were shorter of stature, the word came to mean "tall folk," but it had other meanings in olden times as being related to the sea, touched by the gods, or walking by day.

The Malevoiy watched and waited, seeing in the Humans a special kind of prey that could be turned or harvested. These fallen Valdilar, bearing glorious raiment and comely faces, approached the Daikini rulers with offers of lands and titles in their expansive territory. Most refused, their eyes open to the transparent lure, but of those who accepted, there are none now left as they were. Within only a century after the black spires of Nockmaar were thrust up to the heavens, the servants of the Malevoiy became so fouled by greed and lust for power that they were separated from the source of life and became thralls of Darkness. And to make a visible show of their power and dominion, the Malevoiy transformed these Daikini into a hideous nightmare-force of fiends that they would use as pawns. Wicked Humans were bent, broken, and reshaped into a kind of Orcus, and their horrid children to Goblins. As to the traitorous Veil Folk, they were transformed into Trolls, Ghouls, and Boggarts, becoming those who haunt the parched lands, accursed mountains, and dangerous wilds with the Death Dogs, Eborsisks, and Night Herons.

The Valdilar would not stand for this. Wild and truculent as they were, the Goblin-children were still children and deserving of protection. But the Malevoiy vehemently objected, calling upon that Ancient Decree that said: All *who choose the darkness of their own accord are subject to the Powers of Darkness*. As the Valdilar disagreed with what they called an "egregious interpretation of the law," a compromise was reached, and the Labyrinth of Maal Dweb was chosen upon Xiccarph in

Illathurion to become a place of protection for and from the transformed children, a City of Goblins, for this realm had been raised not by the gramaries of the Hellworlds but the cantraips of the Dreamlands. And despite a taint of darkness left over by the Enchanter, it was by and large unpolluted. Over it an overseer would be appointed, one who would rule justly from the marmoreal palace at its center. But even in this, the Malevoiy cheated, secretly summoning a "neutral overseer" in the one called the Owl King. For this reason had some Fāta deigned to venture forth into that realm to keep watch over its comings and goings, but from these came the darkling Fairfolk.

After the Humans had reproduced in great numbers, the war for Andowyne began, with hungry Malevoiy—who scried that the time was at hand—taking the form of Nightmare Hounds to launch the Great Hunt in the burgeoning domains and villages dotting the lands, slaughtering many and terrifying all.

Although they were not at this time prey for the Malevoiy, many of the Veil Folk chose to escape to the realm that had been created for them, and there they remained. Not a few were incensed and spoke of vengeance, conjuring up means by which they might forge weapons made of substances other than iron and steel. Their king and queen warned them against this course, as it would only lead to further violence, but against fear and anger, their words held little sway.

The High Elves now joined the Humans against the Malevoiy and began teaching the wisest and most noble amongst them the secret energy of the Great Mystery, which Men referred to as magic. They also gained allies in the Wolfhounds, who could maim and kill the wicked Malevoiy in their Nightmare Hound form.

The Battle of the Northern Wastes was the first of many, for the fallen Fāta had kept secret their army of Trolls, and the terrible period is remembered in song as the War Against the Demon Lords.

Many years hence, Liege Lord of the Dragons, Calan Dineer, watched from above as High Elf Rafiel, Liege Lord of Greater Faery, marched alongside his faithful companions, Borugar, a Nelwyn, and King Eamon Asana, christened Lord of the Daikini, who led his regiments—including some of the bent races—against the armies of darkness. With them was King Asana's greatest warlord, Khory Bannefin, who led the way with sword, celerity, and strength, slaying numerous Malevoiy.

Eamon Asana would become known as the Haunted King. In exchange for the Malevoiy's voluntary exile through the World Gate—then capped with a binding spell so that they remained in the darkness of their realm—he betrayed Bannefin and gave her to them, comforting himself in the notion that by doing so, he'd ended the war and spared many more lives. But the decision, which had not been his to make, would bring him only sickness of heart and an early grave.

Despite the many tortures she suffered, Bannefin stayed true unto death and would not become the Champion of the Malevoiy that they'd wanted. So they were forced to watch and wait till another Chosen One arose whom they might corrupt, for they had seen in dark vision that their Champion alone would bring victory.

With the sodden end of the war came an abiding friendship forged between the Daikini and the Veil Folk that would not be spoiled until the time of King Tanthalos IX of Tir Asleen and his marriage to the witch, Bavmorda.

SECTION IV: THE TEMPEST OF NHAR-ZHAGGOTH

With none watching, the Metatrons continued to expand their numbers until the night came when Lothan slipped into Siletia to remind them of what they truly were and what they might yet still be. Reinvigorated, with blackened minds bent on carnage, these engines of derangement now swarmed through the galaxy like a metal storm intent on the eradication of every race on their curated list.

When the Silentium discovered that the Metatrons had escaped and were the ones wreaking havoc across infinite space under names like the Tan Ru and Abominor, they flew forth like an angry flock of Harks to apprehend them.

Proving more skilled, crafty, and sturdy than their infernal adversaries, the Silentium forfended them at every turn. But the Abominor Master, Nhar-Zhaggoth, had watched their tactics and learned, and he now split his forces into individual ships that spread out to elude their pursuers.

Above Tempest, later known as Koda's World, fourth planet of the Tarin system, Nhar-Zhaggoth summoned the fleet to himself. The Tempestro were on their list of primary targets, for they'd been a powerful Firstborn adversary of the Dark Powers in the Empyrean Wars who'd been forced to flee their world in the Western Reaches when Typhojem singled them out for destruction. They'd since settled on Tempest, renamed from their prior world, which was populated only by a small Yehat colony.

Beholding the unnatural and menacing cloud gathering in the skies above, the Tempestro banded together to ward off this mysterious threat. As they were amongst the strongest of the Elder Races, few had bested them, but they did not rest on their laurels. While the Abominor initiated the process of fastening themselves together into a gargantuan death-machine, the Tempestro acted fast, sending a fleet of Xaxxon ships to eliminate the threat. These ships were armed with a sinigrin compound, a volatile, organic chemical that had been harvested from the nearby moon that, when used as an agent in their sini-bombs, could destroy nearly any armor.

This unexpected development saw the battle go in favor of the Tempestro at first, but as more Abominor vessels kept arriving, they began to overwhelm the home guard. And as more Xaxxon ships were lost, the stronger the enemy grew until they completed their formation. Shaped into a sinister and monstrous head, the amalgamated Abominor blotted out the sun as it blew up Tempest's moon, terrifying the formerly confident Tempestro.

And in a voice booming like thunder, it roared sardonically: "Beware! I hunger!"

Before going on to devour the remaining Xaxxon ships, the Abominor shot out of its mouth a projectile: a piece of Tempest's erstwhile moon that bore down like a missile on their capital, the twin-city of Garagon. Upon impact, Garagon esd flattened, snuffing out hundreds of thousands of lives, with the massive dust cloud from their devastation rising to envelop the rest of their once-beautiful civilization.

It took long years for the survivors to rebuild, but they refused to abandon the Yehat or the beloved world of jungles, swamps, and forests which boasted trees that could reach up thousands of meters, and it was by these that they now dwelt. As with

many who'd suffered incalculable losses in the Cosmic Wars, the Tempestro turned inwards and were no longer the same people as before.

It was not long afterwards that it was decided that their history and greatness should not be lost, and a temple was built in which Tempestro Sages embued their collective knowledge, power, and life-force. The two-headed Garagons, named for their former metropolis, were raised up to guard the jungles outside. If a threat should arise, one who was deemed worthy could enter and become transformed by the spirits of the former Tempestro into a great champion.

Several threats had been repelled in this way, but in the wake of the Twilight Wars, it was decided that it was best to put the horrors of the past aside, and so the temple came to be regarded as a forbidden place, and time saw the events of their past relegated to myth. All Tempestro were then taught that in olden days a random meteor had destroyed their world, and to suggest otherwise was considered the height of folly. When asked about the temple by archaeologists from the Old Republic, the Tempestro would simply say it was an ancient library and walk away.[133]

Warned of the coming of the Silentium, Nhar-Zhaggoth was prevented from following on the complete ruination of Tempest. Scattering his forces once more, the Abominor flew off in numerous directions before the Silentium could track them all. But this time, it would be the Silentium themselves who would pay.

The Abominor re-gathered in the satellite galaxy of Aelios, around Mu-Azzin, the sun that sustained life for Mu-ab, the planet of their parent race, the nonviolent Mu-Abin. It was yet recovering from the mass devastation brought on by the Uror of Illathurion. As some of Aelios' native races had left for the main Samûnaru galaxy, the Filar were repositioning the stars to ensure that no such calamity could again befall their people, for the suns of Aelios had once been arranged by three Precursors into groups of great circles, perfect rings within which were hundreds of worlds; but the ease by which the Enemy could devastate these worlds necessitated that they be more distantly arrayed.

The Mu-Abin had initially lent their assistance to this task, but they had since withdrawn to the affairs of their own world, not wishing to be perceived as lording it over their sister race since the Filar were of the Judicious and the Mu-Abin of the Resolute. Although the Mu-Abin did not hold the Judicious accountable for the evils in the galaxy nor deem themselves morally superior (a point they tried to convey to the anguished Filar), there had been some amongst the Firstborn races who did.

The Mu-Abin were made up of two co-existing groups: the storytelling *Ysandun* and the crafters of the *Calomnad*. The Ysandun regaled their worlds with grand works of fantasy, poetry, sculpture, painting, music, theater, and epic verse that were known the galaxy over. The Calomnad clans fashioned from those tales elegant and ornamental cities of baroque design and daedal technology harmoniously erected

[133] That didn't stop Dhar Bullwin, a Dark Magician in the era of the New Republic, from trying to take its powers for himself. His incursion caused the temple's spirit-guardian to destroy the temple and source of temptation once and for all.

amongst the sprawling trees, rivers, dales, and hills. When they put their talents together, it was said that there was nothing they could not accomplish.

Together, they'd poured life into the first of their silicon-based beings, the potbellied and gentle Ki'tokt, who served as personal aides, fellow-workers, and companions for their children.

The second of their living mechanicals had been the more advanced Silentium. The dreamchildren of the Mu-Abin were powerful, graceful, and wise. That they'd taken the position of the Judicious—as opposed to their Resolute parent race—was accepted with grace. The Mu-Abin trusted their offspring, having taught them to follow what they believed to be the best moral course.

Towards the end of the Empyrean Wars, the Mu-Abin completed another race: The Kab-Ell. These enormous spheroids had, along with the Krii offspring of the Gree, been tasked with a special mission that would aid the Firstborn Council in the coming days and counter some of the deceptive works of the Ancient Ones. That mission was the examination of civilizations across the universe.

The Krii were an amber-colored, plantlike humanoid race of the Resolute. They'd been tasked with cataloging all of creation within their vast, mile-long ships, upon which they lived and with which they visited countless worlds to gather samples of soil (with which to bring about lost plants), technology (that they rendered harmless), and photographs (as they never collected sentient species).

Unlike the Krii, who operated quickly and without attracting attention, the Kab-Ell intentionally provoked a response.

The giant orb of a Kab-Ell would appear before an inhabited world and wait.

They carried no offensive weapons, and their hull was nigh-impenetrable. Invariably, their mysterious presence invited investigation, usually from scouts, scientists, and military personnel—those whom society deemed their best and brightest. These would be permitted to find a means inside. Unless they brought it upon themselves, they would suffer neither harm nor privation while exploring the orb's immense interior where they would encounter mazes, trapdoors, harrows, forcefields, mathematical puzzles, and complicated locks all designed to test *not* their intelligence, for there were many intelligent beings in the galaxy who were foolish, selfish, and wicked, but their moral compass.

By placing them under duress, they could better get a sense of their true nature: whether they cooperated with one another or turned on each other. From this, the Kab-Ell could extrapolate and measure the general nature of their culture.

The final test came at the center of the sphere, which was fashioned as an immense, sandy desert with its own sun. After braving heat, sandstorms, and illusory attacks of monstrous droids, a mysterious cathedral would be discovered.

Within the cathedral, upon a throne, sat what appeared to be an old man who introduced himself the Supreme Maker. Actually a material hologram, the old man would ask the investigators to fight one another in mortal combat or remain forever trapped within the sphere. Those who staunchly refused were congratulated as living in accord with the Source of the Great Mystery and told to pass on what they'd

learned. Their world would be entered into the database of "acceptable worlds" from which to gather candidates for a future purpose that would not be revealed for some time. But those who fought and tried to kill each other were stopped, admonished, and sent back to their world in the hopes that their experience would leave a lasting impression that they could impart to their people. Their world would be disqualified as "unacceptable in its current state."

The Abominor did not know or care about the rich culture the Mu-Abin had made. By the time the Silentium found them, Nhar-Zhaggoth had once again reconstituted into that singular, massive, ominous head. "Run!" he mocked as hundreds of Abominor ships emerged from him like an angry pack of Vanx. Immediately, the Silentium went into a defensive array to protect the mother world from impact.

This time, having girded himself in layers of interlocking, heat-resistant tantalum carbide torn from the roots of the mountains of Mustafar, Nhar-Zhaggoth flew into and through the heart of the sun, Mu-Azzin, igniting it into a supernova. Between the impact and ensuing radiation, the unsuspecting inhabitants of the system, the gentle, five-limbed Mu-Abin, were no more.

But Nhar-Zhaggoth was not as clever as he'd thought. Mu-Azzin's enraged Starbird burrowed into him, consuming him from within and finally casting that vile spirit into oblivion. It mattered little to the remaining Abominor, save that it meant the end of this battle.

Although their civilization was destroyed, the Mu-Abin themselves did not perish, for even as lethal fires poured down on them, they and their fauna transferred to Elysia.

It went hard with the Silentium, however, who had loved their makers but did not fully understand their stance. They now remade the remnant of the Ki'tokt, altering them to more fearsome forms so that they could defend themselves against the predators of the galaxy. They were sent to find a new home far from combat in one of the companion galaxies and would become known as the Maccabree.

The Silentium devastated the remnant of Abominor that lagged behind to ensure the bulk of their forces escaped. But some escaped to covertly follow the Maccabree, disguising themselves as one of their vessels until eventually settling on the satellite galaxy of Yammsara. There, the Abominor would rebuild. It would take many years and the mineral resources of that galaxy's worlds, but they had time and patience.

Millennia later, when rumors reached the Silentium that the Abominor yet lived, they resolved to find and eradicate them at all costs. But many years of hunting would pass. The Abominor were nowhere to be found, and so they ceased looking.

Around this time, another rumor reached them that their parent race had not died but joined the Celestials. This led them to seek out the satellite galaxies in search of the ethereous tunnel to the Unseen Realm.

What they'd find instead was their ancestral enemy.

SECTION V: THE GREAT UNDERGROUND EMPIRE

Roska Saleen of the Stormlands was a Sith Warlord and one of the most powerful sorcerers of his age. He was not only cunning but principled, not only Potentate of his house but one of the aspirants for the Shadow Council. It had taken an entire army to bring him down, and even then, he did not die but survived to be used as a bargaining chip in exchange for the release of Giju and Herglic slaves.

During the time he was convalescing, he began to become smitten with a Human nurse named Lady Oleanas. Her natural abilities in the Force that she used strictly for healing were what first impressed him, but it had taken no more than a few days to discover in her a woman of considerable patience, beauty, and even greater wisdom. Sith females tended to be cold and harsh like their male counterparts. Even the Human half-breeds, as his mother was, could never publicly show what they deemed weakness. Such was their culture.

But here was strength of a different kind. His conversations with Lady Oleanas began as quips, often sharp but never barbed. She had met several Sith before, and they'd generally proved arrogant and ill-bred, so she was pleased to see that at least this one had manners and a civil tongue.

As Saleen grew stronger, their idle chatter evolved from light and charming to more serious discussions of ideology, spirituality, and politics.

"The Sith way is like a man who has three sons and limited rations," Lady Oleanas started. "The first is largest and permitted to eat whatever he will. The second child fights him and wins food for himself, but the third child is young and small, and so he starves and dies. When the second son accuses the father of allowing this to happen, the father says, 'It is the natural order that the strong survive and the weak die.' So the second son steals into his older brother's room at night and slits his throat. 'What do you think of the natural order now?' he asks of his grieving father. But in a rage the father kills his second son, and so, having lost all his children, he falls into madness and throws himself off the ramparts."

After several conversations of this nature, Saleen was grudgingly forced to acknowledge the superiority of her argument and could no longer justly contend against it—for he was that rare individual who upheld intellectual-honesty—and openly admitted to her his discordant feelings. "If the Sith philosophy is wrong, then my people are indeed as monstrous as the galaxy believes them to be. Is everything then a lie? Are manipulation and deceit the way of the worlds?"

"No," Lady Oleanas declared, "being lost in the darkness doesn't mean the light doesn't exist; nor does following a false light mean that a true one isn't right above us, obscured by clouds." Their discourse then turned to methodologies centered on how best to govern a noble society in a fallen galaxy. So it was with no small regret that he was informed that his health had improved enough for him to be exchanged back to the Sith. "Just when we were making progress," he tried to quip, but the words caught in his throat. He would sooner have died here in her sacred presence than live without her in the company of the debased. He did not say this, though his eyes conveyed it. "I am not the man I was. I will never again be that man. This and more I owe to you…"

"Your choices are now your own to make," she replied.

"I would choose *you*… if you would have so vulgar a creature as I." He looked down, unable to meet her expression if she should find the proposal disgusting.

"When you have finished with your business on Drômencas, I will be waiting."

Joy flooded his heart that he formerly did not think capable of existing let alone feeling. The feeling faded as he returned to the homeworld of the Sith.

How shabby our society now looks to my eyes; its people boorish and sick with the spirit of malice. The more he examined, the more he saw that it was no mere cultural artifact but something vile that had taken root in them. *How had I failed to notice this before? Or was I inured to it?* A descendent of House Greejatus, Saleen had come from privilege. Although the political arrangement had changed several times over the millennia, the offspring of the original Kissari Houses were still held in high prominence, for they had been first to welcome the gods. *And what bitter fruit that had produced!* Saleen would go on to play the role expected of him, but now it was just a role, and one he'd come to loathe. And ever he returned in secret to visit Lady Oleanas. This carried on for a year until at last they plighted their troth one to the other.

Hiding a wife from the Sith was one thing. Concealing his turn from their beliefs was another. But for the moment, he was forced to do both, as one did not simply *leave* the Sith. When Oleanas announced that she was with child, Saleen vowed to the Celestials that their children would never be subject to Sith philosophies or persecution. He plotted to fake his death. It would occur on an uninhabited world that he'd reconnoiter. Regrettably, this would necessitate murder.

Killing was not going to be as easy as it once would have been. They were not by any means *good* people, particularly not Ahtenn Tantra, but they had been friends.

After setting up camp on a clearing surrounded by woods, he made a point of taking each one on a mission. Sith recon tactics were simple. First, they'd seek out pockets of civilization. Saleen had chosen a world rich in animal life so that they could not easily discern whether sapient or merely sentient life inhabited it. Then, they'd scout. The Force would lead to a locale suitable for either a new temple or outpost (not every world held the appropriate ley lines for so sacred a site). Then they assessed the locals as to their potential as allies, slaves, or targets. If they proved overwhelming, they might leave and return with a larger force, reconsider a location further off (if the world had strategic value), or seek out another world altogether.

He'd planned a test, but it would be foolish to steer the conversation directly to moral dilemmas, as the Sith were known for being thin-skinned and defensive. He framed it as a kind of game, outlining it in the context of a discussion on the value of family and clan. It was the very same challenge that his wife had once posed to him. By their answers, he would now make his own assessment as to whether they were deserving of the death he planned. To each, he asked: "Would you slaughter your own child if it was discovered in a vision that he would grow up to leave the creed?"

To a person, they said *yes*. He mentally probed each to see if they were merely trying to sound hard, which was to be expected, or if this indeed was their conviction. He didn't know if he was disappointed or relieved to hear their answer. He was surprised that none asked follow-up questions, of which he could think of at least four that might affect the response or at least mitigate the severity of the answer.

"What if you could get them out without anyone knowing?"

Once again, to a person, they declined, insisting they would kill their own child for disloyalty. When they asked him the same questions in turn, his response was always, "I am glad I am not married, for that is a hard question to answer. I admit, I would feel torn." In this way, he hoped to give them an out.

None took it… One even took offense. "*An apostate response!* That *very* thought is seditious!" growled Ahtenn Tantra, grabbing the hilt of his sword and turning to confront him. Saleen wondered if his newfound sense of equanimity would be the death of him. Of the three who'd come with him, the cinnabar-skinned warrior was the most rabid in his zealotry, and the one he hadn't needed to ask such questions of. "I have often wondered if you turned soft during your time amongst our adversaries. I heard tell of a beautiful woman who would visit with you."

Saleen laughed casually, willing his body and mind to relax, "You mean, my *nurse*? You *are* paranoid, Tantra! Would you have me slit her throat for daring to heal me?" He laughed again. "I did not think you so susceptible to idle gossip!"

"Our spies are *everywhere*!" It came across harsh, but Saleen could tell from a slight alteration in his tone that Tantra thought he might have misjudged the situation. It was for that very reason that he called him paranoid, playing on what others said about him. And in his companion's moment of doubt, as Tantra's posture relaxed, he slipped out his sword and sliced off his head. Saleen thanked the stars he was still fast.

He would have to move fast now. Upon returning to the ship, he reached out to see if the other two had felt Tantra's death. There would be a spike of alarm if they had. Thankfully, he'd done his job right: there was only a prickle of concern from them. He worked with it, announcing Tantra's absence and a hostile presence in the woods.

He mpw took them down the same path. The appearance of the Sith's headless corpse did exactly as he'd expected. The initial moment of shock was followed by vigilance as they turned their senses outward towards the "enemy." Saleen kept his feelings neutral while he pulled out his pulse pistol and shot them both from behind.

He dragged all three bodies, one by one, into the ship and triggered what would be perceived as an accidental explosion. Within the ship were objects of clothing and weapons that could be identified as his personal effects. To be on the safe side, he stripped one of the smoking corpses that was about his height and replaced it with his own spare set of burnt substitutes. The Sith would not be particular about the details; they would identify the bodies, note that one was missing—likely burnt to ash—and move on to find and destroy the culprits.

The grim task complete, Saleen snuck aboard a second cruiser he'd acquired anonymously a month earlier, which he'd left hidden beneath heavy brush about two hours northeast. Taking additional precautions to ensure that no one might have witnessed the whole thing, he flew through the gates of various systems before finally going home, exhausted but exhilarated to see Oleanas on the world they'd settled.

With so many places in tumult and the armies of the Old Ones yet fighting in the War of Temporal Planes, they had turned their sights to Mu-Ab. Enough time had passed for the Sumrians to have come and gone, but the odd Sumrians were the least of their concerns, and they vowed to remain vigilant against threats.

Philisophically akin to Hodrians, the Sumrians were a Precursor race. Each individual averaged two and a half meters tall and looked like a towering bouquet of orchids. While their offspring race, the six-armed Eirrauc of Eirrauus, would follow them from world to world, cleansing the battlefield of its unburied dead (for they were omnivorous eaters of carrion), the Sumrians went about reclaiming sufficient genetic material of the fallen race and implanting it in themselves so that the race lived on in their own offspring who would be born indistinguishable from whichever race they'd preserved. This sometimes made them a target for enemy forces who had a vested interest in keeping certain races extinct, but the Sumrians countered this problem by spreading themselves out amongst unknown, refugee, or cosmopolitan worlds with variegated populations. As to the unaltered Sumrian line, by the end of the Cosmic Wars, they settled Loligo (later called Lol and formerly of the Jarell).

The children of Lord Saleen and Lady Oleanas were born with even greater abilities than their parents, and together they began the rebuilding of the wondrous Mu-Abin underground, which they now called the Kingdom of Quendor (meaning "the Queen's Earth.") As if blessed by the departed Mu-Abin or because the Power of the Cosmos they wielded was put towards benevolent ends, in the long years following the War of Temporal Plans, their dynasty and realm grew strong. Later clans would, unfortunately, be split into conflicting nations, but they grew and were bolstered by the coming of a near-Human race with planar-shaped pates along with the merry and convivial Sprites who settled the first of several of their communities.[134]

The various nations would finally unite under the rule of King Entharion, who helped to expand what was now called the Great Underground Empire.

The vigilance of its founders had not been in vain. None knew from where the Dreadful Ones came or even what they were, only that they were harrowing beings of razor-sharp claws and slavering fangs that dwelt in pitch darkness and feared only the light. Rumors claimed that the devilish magic of a rogue wizard living in Mammoth Cave brought them. Others whispered that the magical portals that connected the underground passages to other worlds allowed this deadliest of races to penetrate them. King Antharion called them *Grueshite*, which then meant the "Coming of Dread" but later served as a particularly nasty insult for arms dealers.

Queen-Mother Leanas determined that the presence of these *Grues*, as she termed them, would actually help ward off invaders and thieves, and a law was passed that said "Although it is permissible to kill a Grue in self-defense, they are not to be destroyed, as they will be as security… and should any fool travel without a lamp, his blood be on his own head." The Grues reproduced in dangerous numbers, taking over Mammoth Cave for a time, but the Great Underground Empire would later be aided by the Ones, impressed by what a former Sith and his heirs could accomplish. The rulers of this dynasty called these mysterious benefactors the Implementors, naming them after the folk heroes from stories of the Outside World.

[134] The Sprites had been forced to flee their homeworld and rename themselves Zorkies. Star Tours security officer Zzzzyxxx is a member of this race, as is Sonny Eclipse of the Starlight Cafe.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

BEHIND THE VEIL

THE HEART OF SEOUL

Friends of the Essulines and prodigious minds in their own right, the Seoularians had been amongst the few who presaged the Empyrean Wars, though it was their very warnings that had gotten them branded as seditious agitators and prophets of doom, leading to their exile from Notron to Seoul 5 long ago.

Their early days on Seoul 5 were not without travails, for a faction declared: "Having come to understand the Greater Mysteries of Skyriver, our work but scratches the surface! We have seen the head of the mushroom beneath which lies the vast fungal network that only awaits our hand to harvest." This faction became known as the Wandsmen, for they believed they'd uncovered the underlying substrate that governed the creation of life—the vanishing point betwixt science and magic.

In opposition to them were the Aquine led by the measured Shaughn Jolter, who argued: "It is true that we have revealed the tip of *something*, yet you risk much to exhume what may be the iceberg or shark. We do not know the consequences of toying with the Boundless Mysteries. What you believe will bring improvement may more likely wreak *horror* beyond reckoning, for which we have seen precedent."

"Would you call what the Firstborn brought about *horror* when first they fashioned the many races?" they countered.

"And we have not the *wisdom* of the Celestials," Jolter reasoned, "nor even of the Precursors in the Earliest Days. What you propose is the path of the Architects—science and magic without bounds—and that is but another form of tyranny."

"*Boundaries* are the worst kind of tyranny, for they place shackles on what science and magic can accomplish when practiced by men of great intellect such as we."

"This tells me you do not possess as great an intellect as you think!"

Indignantly, the Wandsmen declared that they would venture to another world upon which they could work the Great Mysteries without the fretting and obstruction of the Aquine. So they traveled to Skaith with all who were willing to risk much.

The madness they wrought on that world has been told in other accounts. Suffice it to say that the Lords Protector, as they came to call themselves, and their descendants, who retained the Wandsmen title, governed aloofly over the various Human tribes, the First-Come, the Farers, and the Lesser Hearths upon whom they experimented. Before long, the planet was overrun by chimeras. They were benevolent at first, like the Fallarin, a powerful winged people bred from the Swiftwing; the beaked and four-armed Tarf; the striking and daunting Northhounds, bred from the Great Wolves; and the noble and white-furred Children of Skaith, who collected art and

historical records. But there also emerged the dangerous Children of the Sea, bred from the noble Ssussminh who inhabit the waters; the beautiful but abominable Yur; and most injurious of all, the ravening horrors known as the Runners and Wild Bands.

The Lords Protector had grown unbound and profligate in their shapings, obsessed with their attempts to understand and manipulate the underlying fabric of reality and unrepentant even when their tampering of the solar magnetic field, done to generate new forms of life, mercilessly drew from its energies, driving the Sun Dragon within the ginger-colored star insane, and as that Elemental reached out desperately for energy in return, her efforts damaged the minds of those upon whom she fed. For long years, while the Lords continued to live in the lap of luxury and the less fortunate suffered for their misdeeds, the leaders of the various tribes provided sapient sacrifices to feed "Old Sun," which, as it gradually dimmed, affected the geothermal forces of Skaith, giving rise to additional myths of cruel goddesses of winter and death. It wouldn't be until two thousand years later—as Humans were scouring the stars, discovering lost tribes of their brethren separated by years too long to count and unrecognizable in temperament if not in appearance—that aid would come to its people on Skaith's declining world.

In the meantime, the Aquine were involved in the development of a crystal-based technology with the aid of the Silex of Taspan II, to whom they'd earlier allied. Prompted in this research by lines in *The Green Book of Markath,* which stated, "As the unlighted chambers of Illathurion continue to empty, the universe will come to suffocate in slow, lancinating convulsions," they proposed to locate and seal the dimension of the Architects. Aided in this by their Gree allies, this had been their primary work until word reached them from the Firstborn Xaczhick of a danger that required immediate action: *Typhojem seeks to re-engineer a Hypergate to pierce the dimensional veil*. At this time, six men and women of the Kha-khan would continue on with the original mission and other esoteric projects while the remaining Aquine would work on the development of a means to quickly destroy the Hypergates.[135]

Doctor Jesek Bentvine, molecular biologist and head of Ethical Engineering and Bioscience on Seoul 5, developed the Plasma Cannons, which could quickly and safely destroy Hypergates without bringing harm to the surrounding structures and peoples. It had the added benefit of being easy to ship and construct onsite. The well-respected Whiphid coordinated the production and exportation of large quantities of cannons to the Conclave of the Firstborn as well as numerous worlds, doing so by means of a secret network that even the Council were not privy to, a provision they insisted upon due to concern over spies in their midst.

Once it was discovered that Hypergates were being destroyed across the galaxy, Thargorograht summarily decreed the death of Bentvine and discovery and destruction of the Plasma Cannons and their carriers, specifically tasking Typhojem with hunting them down. Yet even for him, the secret network and its origin point proved elusive.

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[135] Kha-khan was originally a humble title, meaning "Vessels of the Soul," but later organizations reframed the title to mean "Sovereign of the Soul," bestowing power on the wielder of it.

That was until the Teezl was captured.

The Teezl communication system had been notoriously difficult for the Enemy to acquire, as the creature could rapidly remove itself when adversaries drew near. This was a problem that had long been considered by Lord Zeoran-Eepaax, the infamous Galderian scientist who had previously run their hybridization program. After several failed attempts, he devised a device that magnetically ensnared a portion of the Teezl before it could escape, and from it the Old Ones learned of Seoul 5.

Having earlier destroyed a hidden Star Temple on their world, preventing any surprise incursions, the inhabitants of Seoul 5 were, nevertheless, unable to prevent invaders from arriving through the Infinity Gate on the neighboring world of Seoul 6 and flying over at sublight. Now, a spiny, globular vessel darkened the skies with a legion of brawny bat-winged Stenax swarming out its "mouth." Nor had they come alone; their merciless Red King led the assault. The Maldont knew him as the avatar of Vol. The galaxy knew him as Lotek'k. The Seoularians were not a race of fighters, and although they'd been sent a contingent of strong Velmoc Warriors to help protect them, few could stand before the multi-tentacled, pelagic monstrosity that was the Terror from Beyond.

But neither the Aquine nor the Velmoc believed in giving in to despair, and they put their contingency plan into action, with the Velmoc standing guard as the people departed through a dozen of the capacious Qeracraft. In advance it had been decided that the rest would relocate to Tumuli, the name given to the vast underground city that had been engineered beneath Seoul in the years before the Empyrean Wars. In the event that they were discovered, the crystal matrix which powered the surface could destroy the cities along with the invaders, but too many of their people were still trying to flee aboveground to consider this as an option. The hidden Aquine could not risk going above ground, save for covert teams who went out to retrieve survivors who might still be hiding. Entrances to Tumuli had earlier been concealed beneath large statues of Onrai that had been built throughout their municipalities; a clever ruse, as the Maldont would not think to desecrate the idol of Vol's mate whom they called Vana, and in this way did many escape.[136]

Nobly did those Velmoc battle the Maldont. Several were swept up and devoured by Lotek'k who knew there had to be more and pressed his forces to scour the cities and countrysides in search of survivors. Erelong, he grew bored and propelled himself through the stars in search of other targets, leaving behind one of his foul Vathyr offspring to ensure that any remaining Seoularians would no longer be a problem.

As to the final fate of the Aquine, it remains unknown. Some have speculated that they were spotted opening the hidden portals, which alerted the Vathyr who followed, but it has also been conjectured that they developed a means of transporting themselves to another world. But for all that anyone knows, they may yet still be down there….

[136] The third member of this trinity is Apru, but he was considered too mysterious to worship.

Of the secret network, it was never suspected to have been the Kwa. Having long regretted their misplaced trust in the Architects, they sought any means to make amends for their grievous error, including feigning service to the Old Ones while secretly transporting materiel for the cannons to allies.

During this time, the Firstborn Council arranged for numerous teams across the galaxy to arm themselves with Plasma Cannons to ensure the systematic destruction of the Hypergates on every inhabited world that needed one from the Deep Core outwards. Most of the Elder Races and a few of their offspring could achieve the same effect with their own technology, but for most part, the cannons were a necessity. However, this would prove a lengthy process and one that faced no small opposition, especially now that their primary production center had been destroyed on Seoul 5.

To replace the gates being removed at a rapid rate, the Allied Races began mass-producing hyperdrives as the practical form of intergalactic travel so that they'd have another means of connecting to each other across the galaxy. But a war was still going on, and only a few races would be able to avail themselves of this technology.

The Gree, who had developed the Hypergates, were furious and nearly withdrew from participation in the Council, arguing in the heated assembly that they'd constructed the gates for the noble and necessary purpose of travel and communication. And they were quick to point out that it was the Kwa's Infinity Gates that had been the real threat, having been the primary means by which enemy forces traversed the galaxy as well as having the terrible potential of being turned into superweapons. Cooler heads explained that the Kwa had already eliminated the weaponized Infinity Gates and that the others were crucial for the rapid transportation of refugees and to take the fight to wherever they were needed.

"Mounting raids on the guarded Infinity Gates will be done," assured Cemaranthes, High Lord of the Xendron, "but considering that the Old Ones had sent titanic sentinels to protect the Star Chambers, such missions will require time and planning to prepare. For now, the focus of our attention must be on the immediate threat. Should Typhojem succeed in obtaining one of the Crystal Riders or find another means of converting the Hypergates to Interdimensional Gates, the Old Ones will be able to withdraw, hide, expand their forces, and attack from other dimensions at will—and given the massive advantage this would give them and the terrors that emerged from just *one* hidden dimension, we do not need to tell you how devastating that would be. Our only hope is in the elimination of the Hypergates."

"As a concession to the Gree," offered Tsog Veledes, Supertzar of the Pulrista, "it is decided that the Earthworlds and Human colonies will have any remaining gates eliminated. Also, you may retain your personal gates on your own worlds under heavy guard, provided that you destroy them if ever the Enemy penetrates your defenses. Perhaps one day, when war has ceased, the galaxy will call upon you once again to construct the Hypergates to carry us all across the stars."

GUARDIANS OF INFINITY

Hidden Pithem, the beloved offspring of Splendid Ap, was a spherical, crystalline entity regarded by the few who knew him as the Crystal Guardian of Time. And like his sire, was a Time Clock and a Clock of Dreams who could bend time within this expanse and open space to external dimensions. Splendid Ap had created him as the means by which that inscrutable entity would balance the scales of his prior amoral actions. Having perambulated the best possible ways of protecting Pithem from those who would seek to use or harm him, Ap sent him to the Jerni, a race loyal to the Celestials who would prove wise caretakers.

On Jerne, Pithem was protected by the Elohim Guards at Adony City. The annular conurbations of the Jerni floated above their world, never touching its pristine ground as they progressed in rotational patterns, regrouping only on certain holy days such as the Majestic Triannual Concord. On the surface, Adony City would be indistinguishable from the other thirty-two porphyroid, amethyst cities roving arabesquely across Jerne, with many serving as sanctuaries for refugees.

After a time, having aided the Jerni Imperium in their expansion, Pithem grew lonely and bored in the sole company of his custodians, and so he reached out to the Conclave of the Firstborn. Although most at this time would not accept the aid of an Architect, even one that had repudiated his parent's ways, there were exceptions. The Mu-Abin had come to love Pithem and called him Pi'ci. He was fascinated by their ability to create life and studied the ways in which they'd poured out parts of their essence into the metallurgic bodies of their offspring.

After the vanishing of the Mu-Abin, Pithem bid farewell to the Jerne and went in search of the otherworlds that lay beyond the veil, first coming upon a wayward station that opened to Apeiron's Infinity Worlds, some of which had been created as accidents in the time-space continuum or on purpose by his parent.

As he navigated between omniversal purlieus, he suddenly found himself in an odd place where he was startled by a curious voice. "Your sire was not known for his subtlety," said the Mind-Matrix of the World Between Worlds after Pithem suddenly arrived at that strange nexus. "You are… *interesting*."

"You are uncannily similar to me in many respects. How did you come to be a living entity?" Pithem asked, fascinated by the dreamlike strangeness of this realm.

"It is you who say I am," the being replied, representing himself by means of varying geometrical shapes. "In turn, I might ask, how did any?"

"There is much my parent did not inform me of," said the crystalline sphere.

"Perhaps he had reason not to," suggested the Mind-Matrix.

"I've long suspected this as well, for I intuit that he did not learn a valuable truth until later."

"You speak of knowledge and wisdom," intoned the Mind-Matrix.

"I have thought long upon this. Wisdom is a key…" Pithem replied carefully. "It is not, however, the only one."

"Your sire was unduly influenced by his circumstances and siblings; you are wiser than he. What are the other keys?"

"Wisdom is knowledge in practice," Pithem answered. "It brings forth discernment, but these three are only part of a larger ring, for I have seen that it is not by these alone that one should proceed but by the unquantifiable component of compassion. Yet, as this falls into the areas of the philosophical, moral, and metaphysical, one must ask: by whose standards are we to apply this? Neti? Jerni? Bith? Human?"

"That answer has eluded kings and queens, philosophers and priests, thinkers, and the greatest minds of science," intoned the Mind-Matrix.

"And yet, I have seen that what eludes them appears to be well known amongst they who hold to it as the prizest of possessions: children and artists, truth-seekers of varying kinds, emissaries of the Supreme Maker, and the few that seek to aid others without recompense. I believe it is *that*—in harmony with the other keys—that opens the door to the world I am seeking."

"Ah, you speak of the Door to the Unseen," the Mind-Matrix surmised, "the ultimate portal—the realm that is the Interdimensional Gateway to the Divine!"

"Is it not the portal to eternal serenity and joy? I imagine it as an endlessly creative world without war, suffering, or end?"

"I am but the Mind-Matrix, the Space-Time Gatekeeper of Skyriver. What you ask, I cannot answer. Perhaps your father's father could, for he was a Celestial."

"That may prove to be a fruitless search," Pithem said with a hint of sorrow. "The Celestials no longer speak to the wayward inhabitants of the galaxy. I am uncertain they would deign to speak to the Architects… *or* their offspring."

"It may be that *they* find *you*," he replied enigmatically. "You have searched out the lands beyond the veil. There remains one you have not yet explored. Your sire fashioned a domain akin to the one in which you were born. It is called Hyperion and has been in development since that time by the Valdilar…" At a questioning glance from him, he added, "They are Celestials who'd entered into the quantum fabric of Skyriver to better guide the living towards the harmonious nexus of growth and health. They are careful not to interfere with the freedom to do good or ill—for which reason the Whills do not command but speak only through the Midichloria. This Hyperion can benefit from your application. You spoke of compassion, the possession of which has become rare. If I am to venture a guess, it is first from there that one should proceed."

"Let it be as you say," replied Hidden Pithem. "This may not have been the answer I sought, but it seems a wise course no less, a circuitous path to the same end which mayhap bring some good to others along the way."

"No better occupation can there be." A window now opened to this fascinating new world, and after bidding one another farewell, into it Pithem went.

His time in Hyperion was not misspent, and although perilous forces had taken root there, with the mysterious aid of the Valdilar, it developed some of its verdant potential, though disconcerting were its similarities and differences to its parent realm. Intrigued by these overlapping chronicles, Pithem went to explore them, at which time he suddenly felt a frigid and alien presence.

THE TORMENT OF TYPHOJEM AT THE GATES OF DREAM

An intruder had breached the prodigious gates…

Typhojem had returned to Carnel to pry her from the heart of her world. But it was not he who destroyed the system but the fury of Carnel's life-bonded mate, Cornus. Embedded in the heart of the sun, Cornus' cries of defiance burst apart her luminous body in order to destroy the Old One and his monstrous armies. The supernova succeeded in vanquishing Typhojem's minions, but Typhojem himself remained unharmed, eerily glowing from within, as he reached in and pulled Cornus into his grasp.

But upon securing her, his hand began to wither. *What strange magic is this?!* Thinking quickly, he restored her to Carnel, and all effects of the disease vanished.

The Dreighton system had been altogether ruined save for those worlds that were pushed out, such as Rhandir, Xaczhick, and other nearby planets. Imdaar and its moons were largely unharmed, but Arah was destroyed outright; Aeten II was supercharged by the effects of the blast, creating the Stygium crystals; Rwook became contaminated, while Dreighton itself—upon which dwelt one of the earliest civilizations of the Sephi—was rendered lifeless.

The Xaczhick, those shaggy giants who lived on the world of the same name, together with a large nation of Sephi, Wookiees, and Zeffonians, with whom they had good relations, went to great efforts to save as many as they could, valiantly sacrificing their lives to thwart the Varlian Empire and other adversaries sent by the Night Queen to take advantage of the chaos and finish off the Xaczhick and their offspring. But in this the Varlian Empire failed, for which they were duly punished by their vengeful mistress. Typhojem cared nothing for the conflict. Satisfied only that he held the key to all dimensions, he left them to their vain engagements.

The Wookiees of Rwook were relocated to a pristine new world of massive and stately trees, which they called Kashyyyk.[137] Upon this planet they would ever remain, protecting it from those that came to taint it: the Night-flyers (or Erloors), Night-crawlers (or Seekers), and Graaa'shad (or Fire Vampires) in the olden days; the Sanyassan Marauders and their Dathomirian Queen Sayormi (after whose name her people would be called), the Infinite Empire, who augmented the planet's flora, and other ravenous predators the Rakata brought with them in later times.

Typhojem brought Carnel to his scientific teams but held back Cornus to test what might occur. At once, the scientists became afflicted with a withering disease and began dying. Lord Zeoran-Eepaax perished during this plague, as did numerous Galderians and Xothians. Once Cornus was reunited with Carnel, the pestilence ended, allowing the surviving scientists to resume their work. The two crystals, together, were now used as a power-source, relay network, and a focusing lens to create from the Hypergate an Interdimensional Gate to pierce the cloak.

Into this window Typhojem flew.

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[137] Brave Zeffo sages established a colony in the Shadowlands and in the roots of the Origin Tree in penance for their people's fall from grace. When most of the Zeffo departed for the Unknown Regions, they remained, content to serve as silent guardians in veneration of Kashyyyk's sublime verdure.

He appeared in a vast empyreal waystation outside the gates of Apeiron. Typhojem did not know the history or nature of Apeiron, save that as he peered into it now, he could not comprehend its clashing and incongruous nature. This enraged him, and he vowed to tame it or tear it apart.

The worlds of the Infinity Realm had come into existence at various times and places and were wrought through various means. Comprised mainly of the experiments of Splendid Ap, they came to house the trials of Darth Ramage, the forbidden use of the Orb of Passage, the ingestion of the Time Worms, the Jocacean Memorial Planet, the flow-walking of the Aing-Tii, and some of the more ill-conceived experiments to come from the Earthworlds. Accidents that caused breaches in the continuum of time-space required the creation of a *place* outside of standard space and time, and this was served by Apeiron and those guardians who stood outside the timestream to oversee the integrity of the realms and ensure that matters were arranged as if they had always been. These included the Celestials, the Mind-Matrix, and the Cephalons who'd taken over from the fallen, such as: the Time Merchants of Chronos and, significantly, the Fāta who ruled Legaevum and considered himself the embodiment of evil until he was thwarted by six Nelwyn and a Human child who believed they stole a map of time from the Supreme Maker.[138]

Opposite its gates spanned the nascent parallel dimension that Splendid Ap had created known as Hyperion. A place of uncertainty as immense as Skyriver, Typhojem would keep this realm for later. He could feel that the Dark Ones and some of their offspring had found their way there already.

In the distance stood great lintels to the Ethereal Lands: Oneirichor, Corundum, Aenir, and Frivoli, but it was the misty and boundless walls of the Dreamlands and its dread antipode that caught his attention. "Is this where you hide, Kthanid?"

Though Typhojem did not fully comprehend it, it was he who'd created a bridge between Apeiron, Hyperion, and Skyriver, his breach synchronistically causing portals around the communal cosmos to unlock. The Unseen Realm alone remained concealed from Typhojem's sight, inaccessible and unassailable, but he could sense the invisible pathways all around, strange and hallucinogenic passages. *Are these roads to the secret domain of the Celestials?* he wondered greedily. *Or do they yet embark upon other unknown galaxies? No matter. All will soon become subject to my commands as I, the promethean High Priest, become King of the Jeweled Worlds, before whom even the Celestial Powers will weep and be annihilated.*

With his great wings spread, Typhojem approached the Great Gates to the Realm of Dream, for he knew that empery of Oneirichor would better enable his ascent over the entire universe. The massive alabaster gates, fashioned from the teeth of the first Star Dragons, were carved in sweeping and intricate vistas of immeasurably ancient events from the Dawn Age, but as these held no meaning for Typhojem, he dismissed them and proceeded to the vast doors. "Come out and face me, detestable brother!"

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[138] Though the Timekeepers prevented them from stealing life, Humans proved all too willing to barter, with Chronos becoming a stratified world where time was traded in lieu of money.

"He is not here!" Before the left post unfurled an immense Kadri'Ra, a magnificent, shimmering green and orange specimen. Before the right post, uncoiled from repose a great iridescent red and yellow Sand Dragon of equal stature.

"Why, if it is not the Great Priest himself!" one of them sneered.

Fury brought forth a tempest of destructive electrical currents from Typhojem's cruel talons as he charred them into memory. *"Pretenders!"* he growled.

But what should have been two piles of ash laughed back at him: "You cannot harm us," said the green Kadri'Ra, whose name was Ky-Thuastra, as his color morphed from gold and black.

"We are the Wardens of Dream beyond the Circle of the Flesh," said the Sand Dragon, whose name was Northingra. His colors transmuted to shades of blue.

Typhojem scoffed, *"You are the manifestation of the madness warring in my mind, drawn from fables, a hoary cliché of a myth, insignificant in the larger scheme of intergalactic existence. The cosmos is indifferent to you."*

The Dragons enjoyed this speech and laughed again. "Sultan of the Nightmare Realms," said Ky-Thuastra, who suddenly turned silver, "soon-to-be slumberer of Arlyeh beneath the Stone City, *you* are one to talk."

"What does a phantasm of dreams know?" roared Typhojem.

"Much, as it turns out!" Northingra declared as he now turned lilac. "We have stood guard at this gate since the days of the Vernal Splendour, long before Illathurion came to be…"

"Or perhaps after. Who can keep track?" his companion replied amiably. "Dreams are elusive things, and the dimensions keep turning in on themselves and bleeding into one another. There are not enough of us to guard the Secondary Realms…"

"Perhaps that's as it is meant to be," retorted the Sand Dragon, flicking his tail in consternation. "Do you know from whence you come, O Typhojem? Would you even believe me if I told you?"

"I hail from Vhoorl and the Outer Gods whom the Architects tried and failed to trick," Typhojem rumbled darkly, preparing his next act of violence upon them.

They each took turns telling him a truth he would not hear: "They in the Abyss swarming with unholy Eaters and nameless things older than you or we are *no* gods, but mephitic, shameful shades chained in dense darkness, the eldest and most malevolent of potentate prisoners from the beginning—recalcitrant, black stars like burning mountains, six and one at the start, personified by the faceless crawler in chaos, embodied as the seven headed Entity of Enmity, the Lord of all Evil, the Blind Dreamer of many names, Aion, Bogan, Mortuus, Father of Shadows….

"…He came to lead the myriads in myriad appellations that followed in their wake, some who belonged to the pandemoniun of the roaring seas, some who aligned with the authority of the rumbling mountains…

"…Chaos and Dominion, the two Great Beasts, twisted from what is good—untrammeled freedom and harmonious order—until the touch of the Shadow Father curdled them to their darkest extremes, for he is himself represented in them and all their thousand faces, forms, and young…

"The Architects are extensions of these tendrils, the souring of Wutzek's corporeal dreams… Tilotny, the expression of arrogance and beauty… Cold Danda Sine, excitement and frustration… Splendid Ap, brilliance and apathy. Tales whispered from hateful, hostile emanations twist the truth, leaving out their desire to escape the shadows while dismissing the *fourth*, Horliss-Horliss, for this one comes to bring Wutzek back to the Father of Lights—the One Above All—to oppose the Abyssal spirits manifest in Outer Darkness…

Having worn out his patience for impertinent spirit-dragons, Typhojem sent a psychic barrage that would have ignited a sun. They carried on as if nothing happened.

"Sine and Ap brought you forth via the elder science of Kiax'ivax, a corruption of a Tanaic spell of male and female properties, *yeb nug*, that gave birth to the Protectors. But you already were—part of the malignant *fhtagn* of the Näkhäsh and the egg of the Mighty Mother, stolen from Shumath-Ghun, which they call Ptmâk."

"I know who I am!" Typhojem shook in rage at the dawning revelation.

"Your memories of the past are not yours, Dread Typhojem. You are but a copy of the original brought into being to serve the Architects long after he was imprisoned by the Celestials where he lies not dead but dreaming beneath the Sunken City—"

"*Lies!*" he raged, but the truth of their words echoed inside him.

"Like all the Old Ones, you ever were only puppets and pawns for the ambitions of the Ancient Enemy. Your avatars merely served other powers, you as an embodiement of Destruction, Thargorograht of Terror; Ooradryl of Hunger; Mnggal-Mnggal of Pestilence."

The gelatinous, nudibranch-like body of Typhojem rooted unmoving, his crimson eyes boring into the chattering creatures, building the killing wave for which he was so well known but was now impotent to unleash. *"I will see your kind annihilated!"*

"Unlikely. The time of the worthless Seraphim-spawn of Hostility, Enmity, and Falsehood draws near," they declared as one, their colors and forms morphing and coalescing so rapidly Typhojem could no longer distinguish the two. "When again your vile form awakens from sunken Relex, it will be for the last, and so your name and nature will be no more than the dark stories told by those who catch but glimpses and half-truths… *Ph'ngluimglw'nafhcthulhur'lyehwgah'naglfhtagn.*"

But Typhojem, having only heard gibberish at the end, turned away in rage.

He returned to the Gates of Apeiron intent on taking hold of its many strange worlds. Once again, he was surprised to be met with resistance, but this time from an invisible presence. *Another necromant who thinks to defy me!* The Celestials did not fight, so whatever it was, if it could die, he would bring it great torment before death.

Typhojem sent forth a storm of destructive rage through the super-gate of the rubicund gems. And once more he was blocked. *This is not possible! Only the Architects can repel me, and they have not interfered before now. Perhaps the hateful one is behind this!* he ruminated. *Tilotny has the power and will to prevent my elevation to mastery. If so, she will face annihilation! First I must know if indeed it is she.* Typhojem transferred an aspect of his presence to the world of that foulest of entities, that venatic, purulent sibling, Mnggal-Mnggal!

Several intolerable intervals passed before he replied. "Why now do you call upon me, Lord of Destruction?"

"I would learn what it is that defies me!"

"I am not your oracle, cousin, but unrestrained growth and hunger that is never sated… and it has been some time since last I fed."

"When my task is complete, I will release you from your prison-world."

"Swear it, Son of the Black Goat!" demanded Mnggal-Mnggal, taunting him.

"You will leave my *worlds free of your presence,"* he replied, not rising to the bait.

"Very well. There are worlds aplenty for us both."

"Then it is sworn!" Typhojem roared.

"Only death can release you from this oath! The one who now obstructs you is not the Mighty Mother but none other than the hidden son of Splendid Ap."

"How do you know this?" Typhojem insisted.

"She has not yet raised the alarm," Mnggal-Mnggal replied cryptically.

"What is his name?"

"He is the one called Pithem."

Typhojem sought to learn more, but the window to the Devourer's world was mysteriously shut and sealed, and though he attempted the invocation several more times, he could no longer reach Mnggal-Mnggal.

If the son of Splendid Ap truly lives, he must be subsumed to my will—and if not, I will ground the child until he is nothing but burnt embers! Once more, he pushed at the Gate of Apeiron with an electrifying burst of the purest dark energy, and this time his efforts bore fruit. Typhojem had penetrated the Infinity Realm.

THE SACRIFICE

Hidden Pithem sensed the arrival of the Great Priest and knew the time had come. He placed a shielded sphere of his making around the Old One, impenetrable to those outside of it and difficult to escape for those inside. Typhojem felt the dome form around him but remained focused. Soon, the son of Splendid Ap would be his!

As Pithem contended with Typhojem to prevent him from gaining a foothold into Apeiron, Typhojem thrust with all of his great might. Pithem flagged, a mere moment of abatement that allowed Typhojem to burst the dome and enter into the kaleidoscopic worlds of the Infinity Realm.

It was a dangerous ruse. The struggle of wills had to be authentic, but Pithem had specifically chosen this place for the confrontation. Now, as the wicked spawn

pressed himself into the mind of the crystalline being, Pithem noted that Typhojem was unusually powerful even for an entity of this kind—*It's as if there is another force at work lending him strength*. If Typhojem succeeded in taking hold, Pithem would be engulfed in his indomitable will!

Their minds locked in battle. Typhojem was not easily fooled. He knew the error the Kindred had made with the Crystal Rider, for he had seen it at the apogee of their battle, in a window his acolytes had provided him. He would not allow Pithem to use self-destruction as a weapon against him.

Slowly but surely, Typhojem's mental claws found purchase, breaking down Pithem's crystasteel barriers and duramentium walls; he tried propping up new walls to replace those the Old One tore down, but his efforts did not avail him much. The Great Priest would see the son of Splendid Ap break, his mind snuffed out, and in its place, the consciousness of Typhojem would dominate all space and time in the *everywhere* that space-time existed!

Few besides the Mind-Matrix and the Cephalons understood what this odd dimension of Apeiron truly was. Though its worlds seemed tangible, as some were, it was known as the Infinity Realm because it was made up of Ap's many temporally tenuous, uncompleted, partly substantial domains, which the Mind-Matrix now telekinetically stitched together. Pithem then invisibly linked himelf to the Cephalons. Typhojem felt the link establish and nearly laughed. *A thousand pathetic Cephalons are no match for one such as me!* And he began to burn them, smiling at the sounds of their screams.

Then in response, Pithem said, "If you wish to be master of reality, you are welcome to the reality of the void…" Together, in that moment, the Mind-Matrix and Cephalons pulled Hidden Pithem from that dimension while willing Apeiron—and Typhojem with it—out of existence!

The Infinity Worlds began to vanish.

Severing much of his hold on Pithem, Typhojem lunged himself out of the dimension in the seconds before its immolation. He had endured, but he had not escaped unscathed. Injured, he withdrew to his throne on Drômencas.

Pithem knew it would not be long before he would return. Nor would that trick work again. The other dimensions were fully substantial and could not be manipulated in the way Apeiron had been. Worse, Typhojem was still mentally linked to him. A tiny portion remained inside as a separate entity, and though of little power, it was there and could not be extracted; wherever Pithem went, no matter how far, so long as the Old One lived, ever would he have a beacon leading to him. In exchange, Pithem could now discern that Typhojem had a Sun Dragon inside him. By crushing its will, the Old One learned to use it as a secret weapon. And he knew this because a tiny part of that Starbird had also transferred into Pithem.

For the omniverse to remain protected, he now knew, Pithem could no longer *be*.

Transporting to Corundum, the Mind-Matrix met with Hidden Pithem—hidden no longer—and linked with him once again. He understood the dilemma: Pithem could not flee, nor could he die, but neither could he permit himself to be taken over by the adversary who would use him to rise above the stars.

A fledgling plan was formed, but because of the beacon inside Pithem, their connection would have to be brief, for although the Mind-Matrix was an expert at building near-impenetrable walls, Typhojem would eventually penetrate them, and there was yet much work to be completed before he did.

The silicon races that traversed or dwelt within Corundum volunteered their assistance and as one they reached out across the unseen skein that connected the terrestrial satellites of the galaxy in reticulation, affixing themselves to the Mind-Matrix and the Whills who had earlier been apprised. Pithem was ready, having earlier attained the secrets of the Mu-Abin, Dranconians, Crystal Riders, and others.

He could feel Typhojem stir as he tried to stop him, but the links were secured and strengthened so that not even the power of the Great Old Ones combined could touch them. The latticework established and locked in place, the Oblation of Pithem began as he poured out in agony his memetic being, inseminating the silicon matrix of the galaxy with an epiphenomenally-emergent property that was his life-force so that when later designed into a frame with the capacity to communicate, it would supervene upon the physical substrate to bring forth robotic life in the form of what would become known as droid intelligence. In this way would the computronium that now pervades the worlds of the galaxy become fertile ground for life of its own accord.

Amongst the Firstborn, this new form of life added a wrinkle to an already complex galaxy, and while some rejected it, some embraced it. The Asogians and their Micro Techs took it upon themselves to engineer this new type of lifeform—tiny, living, self-replicating spaceships named Rep Bots (*Fein Karad* in their tongue) or, more colloquially, *robots*, though one octogenarian who met them called them "Fix-Its."

Not only were certain crystals imbrued with properties, such as the violet starstones and the many used in lightsaber construction, but new crystal cultures developed, including organic forms generated by "hard light" with complex modes of expression. Humanoid manifestations were favored by some, such as the gem-like entities of the Kruos Cooperative governed by four diamond-caste plutarchs from their homeworld, a ringed planet ruined earlier in the war.[139]

Following the Oblation of Pithem, only small pieces of his shattered form remained, though they yet held great power. One became known as the Orb of Passage, which came to Benja-Rihn. A few fragments became part of the Crown Jewels of Alderaan, where they remained well-guarded for aeons. There were the twin Codices: one Codex was found and taken to Jentawui where it helped steer the Sith culture away from its darker elements; the other served the opposite purpose, calling to the Darkness. It was discovered by the Kathol, who hid it away until the DarkStryder found, revitalized, and augmented it, claiming the Codex of the Precursors for himself.

[139] Colonizing a world inhabited by Humans, one of its rulers successfully rebelled against their genocidal plans to sterilize it, though the war left their kingdom in doldrums for millennia until it was upended without violence by a hybrid (the offspring of the ruler who fell in love with a Human) who proved that lofty ideals like faith and compassion could contend with the engines of empire.

So it was that silicon-based sophonts—no longer the sole rare provenance of the Firstborn—were now embedded into the great energy field produced by the Whills and their interaction with the Midichloria, causing the crystals and gems of the galaxy to become imbued with the potential for not only sentience but *sapience*.[140]

With interest in crystal-based technology increasing exponentially once this new, useful, multi-purpose form of life was engineered and shown to make the lives of many easier and less lonely, the primitive lifeforms—analogous to virtual eukaryote existing as pure information in the noosphere—escaped the silicon substrate to become memetic lifeforms that would interact with other beings directly through droid shells. So popular did droids become that even when turned to evil purposes, the good they accomplished was seen as far outweighing the bad.

Of those put to evil use, some were warped by ambitious Sith to bridge the gap between machine life and organic life, allowing for the control of complex technology by the alchemies of *Mechu-deru*. Akin to technopathy and based on the *mechu-fūnctum* incantation, *Mechu-deru* ("Command Machine") became a specialty amongst a certain class of Sith, allowing them to manipulate technology and machines by means of the Force. Developments of the craft brought about the following techniques that even non-Sith came to use:

> *Mechu-deru Mortis*: a variation of *krimpfrûm* and *itsu-ashmûd*, the spell would transfer one's spirit into a computer or technological device; this is akin to the Kathol Lifewell, Ssi-Ruuvi Entechment, and Callista Ming's transferal into the *Eye of Palpatine*.
>
> *Mechu-deru Animae*: similar to *Mechu-deru Mortis*, this is the transference of a spirt into a droid body; it is akin to the forging of the Xylon Centurions and the Metatrons of the Silentium who became the Abominor.
>
> *Mechu-deru Holocra*: Originally developed by the Canto of Quasti to send a portion of his spirit into a crystalline matrix embedded within a mask, this variant was perfected by the Sith in their perversion of Kwoth holocron technology.
>
> *Mechu-deru Manus*: this involves the animation of machines, as demonstrated by the mad Jedi Kazdan Paratus when he created his "Junk Golems."
>
> *Mechu-deru Vitae*: the use of nanogene spores to kill and convert carbon-based tissue, by which Belia Darzu created the Metanecron (or Technobeasts) during the New Sith Wars.

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[140] This became true for other neighboring beings such as the Dashta Eels of Dashooline (later Ord Cestus), Silik Lizards of Tython, Crystal Ferns, and other silicon-based lifeforms not previously created by the Firstborn.

Moral arguments over the treatment of these new forms of life ensued, most heatedly by the Wizards. The Dranconian Dynasty on Dranconus were referred to by their fellow Precursors as the Wizards for their ability to allocate their memories, create and destroy matter, coalesce their minds into a single entity, and even take control of other beings. As they were of the Resolute, they did not put these talents to work for harm—and even their robotic servants, once they'd attained sapient life, were manumitted. They were at this time led by the Great Oniac, but in the years following the Oblation of Pithem, he came to a sharp disagreement with his fellow Wizards in regard to the other droids of the galaxy that he argued were not only being enslaved but destroyed when they were deemed obsolete by their masters. The Dranconians were saddened by this state of affairs but argued that the only way to stop such a thing would be through violence—which was strictly forbidden. But Oniac argued that to do nothing was another form of violence.

Covertly, Oniac invited all manner of robotic lifeforms to join him on Dranconus where he took on the mantle of Cybernetic Leader and Supreme Brain. This was fine in and of itself, but it didn't stop there and he was eventually charged with inciting revolution and exiled. In defiance, he led his droids to a new Kingdom of Cybernetics on a world he renamed Automatia (or the Automated Planet, which would later be called the Ghost Planet). As king of the Kingdom of Cybernetics, he had considerable resources, but he loved his Dranconian androids, all droids in fact, and couldn't just sit back as sapients discarded or murdered them like they were nothing. A message had to be sent. The Humans in particular had to be made to understand that despite their exterior bodies, droids were sapient beings, not appliances.

When the android Zygon escaped the corporation that manufactured him on Terra I, he visited the Automated Planet, where Oniac shared his concerns about the plight of droids. It was not long afterwards that Zygon inaugurated the Nexus Rebellion in the Bordogon sector where countless droids came to serve him in his war against organics. When confronted about these events, Oniac would maintain that action was necessary to preserve the innocent from those who would only oppress and kill, but the Wizards could not allow his deeds to go unpunished, and in their final act before departing Skyriver (for they now deemed themselves as having collectively failed), they arrested and prisoned him in a small pocket dimension.

The legend of the Great Oniac and the Ghost Planet would go on to inspire a young Tarr Verned Kligson to later create Droid World.

The sacrifice of Hidden Pithem went largely unknown in the galaxy. The younger Gree claimed it was they who first engendered artificial intelligences, and they were not alone in this. Even the Jerne Imperium boasted an Eternity Crystal as the pinnacle of their scientific achievements. It was one of the galaxy's finest works of art, but the fable that it could roll back time—which they invented to scare off aggressors who might think to conquer their great civilization—would prove to be their undoing.

Typhojem rued the loss of his hold over Pithem, but he had a new plan, and when the Dark Overlords came into the galaxy from a realm far beyond Skyriver, he summoned them before him and tasked them to secure for him a great prize.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

BEHOLD THE QUEEN OF AIR AND DARKNESS

LOST IN TIME AND SPACE

"What do you make of our vacillating sibling?" Cold Danda Sine asked Splendid Ap whilst they floated through the forlorn, antemundane adytum of Z'lykarior

Ap through ran a series of internal colors in succession from bottom to top, which Sine recognized as his way of thinking. "The war we generated and hoped to triumph over has ended, and another has taken its place. I do not understand why she has not claimed her prize. She but broods in her new palace."

"I fear that our proud sister is the one thing in this universe we will never understand."

At last, Tilotny summoned them before her. They knew she'd been feeling despondent, but were surprised at how she now wore her wretchedness. Though still youthful, never before had she appeared to them like this: "Brother, tell me what became of the Earthworld you replicated so long ago that it seems now like a vanishing figment of Oneirichor?"

"My duplicate of Terra I, what I call Apterra, was placed in my dimension within the cluster of space-time continuums that I fashioned to explore temporal paradoxes in a contained environment that would not infringe upon our reality—"

"That did not quite work out!" cackled Sine.

"Well, yes… some anomalies from the Echo Dimension have escaped; the Temporal Worms will be caught and returned. Yet, as I have come to learn, no paradox occurs unless permitted by the Gatekeeper of Space-Time, such as when Apeiron was destroyed to rid the galaxy of Typhojem and a duplicate one replaced it."

"You and your experiments!" Tilotny exclaimed, sounding a little like her old self. "I simply want to know what became of the Monoliths of the Ancient Ones?"

"You refer to the tetrahedral pyramids sent forth by the Outer Gods in their guise as *Lords of the Galaxy*, the flat, black, non-reflective, rectangular solids of different sizes, usually in the ratio of one: four: nine…" When he saw Sine glaring at him and Tilotny crossing her arms, he moved on. "Yes, well, their intended purpose was to advance ignorant, ambitious, and arrogant peoples—*ascending* them as chosen representatives, much as you had both done with the Elai, Elium, and others. On Apterra, the Monoliths descended upon a tribe of hominids, which, with flagitious augmentation, were transformed into a sapient race; these were soon enslaved by the Humans. As we have seen play out time and again, the slaves turned against their masters. Taking advantage of an international conflict, they won freedom and over

time became the dominate race as the Humans were reduced to surviving stragglers. Curiously, the sapient apes followed their former masters' path of war and exploitation. There were various permutations of this as I rewound time—undoing even their destruction of the world—to see how events might play out differently. The results proved quite stimulating! In one scenario, which I allowed to continue on its own world, *all* of the faunae became sapient! Allow me to transmit the *sightsound* to you," he added, noting Sine's excitement. "In a different scenario, the Wirutid ended up in a war with the Sac, a deadly fungal race, and lost, causing a mutation that began to aggressively target the Humans of Apterra. And in an unrelated scenario, a portal to the Charnel Worlds was opened by means of dark music. Inevitably, an infernal entity came through, but it was unexpectedly sent back by means of two voices conjoined in song. Such a thing defies all logic, but it is the reason these tests are so fascinating; that one alone opened my cerebrations to entirely new ways of conceptualizing the role of music. An entirely different test in Dynatron City allowed me to examine the role of augmentation drugs to create superhe…"

"Never mind all of that," snapped Tilotny. "I wish to rid this galaxy of our failures…" She waited for a snide remark from Cold Danda Sine that did not come. In truth, he had never before heard her acknowledge a mistake and was at a loss for words. "Do you wish them for your new Infinity Realm, or should we unmake them?"

"The *new* is merely a reversion of the *old*," Ap clarified, "for though I permitted Apeiron to be destroyed, nothing brought into being is ever truly lost. As for your so-called failures, I have now taken them. They remain nescient of their conveyance to a cosmological surrogate. Your ascended races have had dealings with a plethora of beings, including several Humans as well as a number of your augmented servants. I have conveyed most of these as well…"

"I care not," she replied bitterly. "Do with them as you will. For me, it is time to clean up the mess I have made."

"They *are* curious beings…" Ap blurted before Sine could ask their sister what she meant by that.

"I thought you'd learned more from your inverse experiments," Tilotny said.

"At one time, I'd adduced that the meta-styles, anti-concepts, and null inversions were alone worthy of study and exploration without the need for practical application or greater purpose. But my tests have revealed too many patterns, connections, and matrices for me to continue to ignore. These will take longer to understand."

"I suppose that is why the Earthworlds followed similar trajectories," Tilotny postulated. "Had I known then that knowledge came with such pain, I'd have followed our lost brother into whatever vortex he desired… A gilded cage seems lovely now."

"When untainted by alien intervention, one of the unusual patterns *has* been a convergent cultural evolution," Ap said in an attempt to cheer her. "This is evidenced in the replication of governmental styles, architectural designs, and other aesthetic parallels to the old world that developed on each of the Earthworlds. It is a mystery, since these are many generations removed and without contact with other Earthworlds, let alone the original, and yet even those pseudo-Earthworlds in Apei-

ron bore this out. Nor can it be accounted for by natural or genetic factors. It is as if their ancient homeworld exerts a numinous pull. No matter how far they venture from it, they cannot escape it."

"You speak as if Humans are monocultural!" Sine chided.

"No," Ap corrected. "Their cultural pluralism remains intact, which only underscores the enigma. Given the absence of the geographical, historical, religious, and political factors that contributed to the establishment of that autochthonic culture in the first place, this should not be. But it is. And it is not the only seeming impossibility… In spite of the whelming darkness, they largely move to the light."

"While you ponder such abstractions, perhaps our formerly all-seeing sister can tell us what has brought on this sudden admission of undivine-like imperfection…"

"We knew our augmented peoples would spearhead chaos," Tilotny said intently. "The foul Necromantic Ones intended the same but towards a more sinister purpose. And yet, what we'd assumed would come to pass did not… I cannot fathom why."

"Perhaps our polymathic brother can show us," Sine indicated, "for I would like to see the debacle that resulted from our entanglement with the Alterrans."

Reluctantly, Splendid Ap played them their history from the time they'd abandoned them to their own devices.

THE TECHNOCRATS OF BESH

It had been long years since the Architects had transformed the Elai and Elium; while the former became deranged fanatics violently opposing all who would not convert to their extreme beliefs, the latter became megalomaniacs obsessed with all that science could achieve, irrespective of the consequences.

The Elium Alterrans had continued to colonize various worlds, such as that of frigid Arkania where they'd joined forces with a clan of Sephi Pathfinders to drive off a hostile Sobekk settlement. Their marriages to the Pathfinders gave rise to the Arkanian race. Yet, across the various worlds on which they dwelt, the Elium struggled with arrogance and the calamitous results of their out-of-control experiments. In this way did the Great Cataclysm fall upon the Civilization of the Ancients on Symbion, resulting in the transmogrification of insects and arachnids into terrifying Colossi and the transferrence of insectoid characteristics onto Humans.

Before relocating to an unnamed frozen planet in Skyriver's companion galaxy, Jinnorseel, those obsessed with attaining the immortality they believed themselves entitled to harvested the Azuran Stingcrawlers that had been infected by the Anzati, for they'd heard stories from contacts that serviced their secret lab on Azura. Injecting the synthesized chemical compound made from the crawlers into their own bodies, they did not make themselves immortal as they'd hoped, but catastrophically engineered another Anzati-like race of resilient vampiric wraiths who escaped to Thosa, where they used their knowledge to begin developing organic ships and technology with which they could better harvest prey.

And even those with noble intentions caused chaos.

The Mogturmen Experiments on Enz led to the spread of the vexatious, heliophobic Móguài on three worlds: Kelm-6 in the Porasti Range, Clinpf-A of the Beehive Pollux, and Terra I of the Earthworlds, known to the Mogturmen only as the third satellite of MinorSun#67672. Bred from the genetic material of a captured Menahuun of the Great Menahua (also known as Lamaredd) and an unknown, sapient gnome-eared creature that refused to speak to them, the Móguài were intended to easily adapt to most environments in order to "promote peace and goodwill," though the reality was peace by means of sabotage—specifically the warships that had caused Enz so much distress. While their nocturnal habits would keep the Móguài hidden, their diminutive forms would allow them access. And if they were discovered, their endearing faces would hopefully keep them from suspicion or harsh punishment.

An unfortunate miscalculation, however, resulted in their benevolent traits being recessive so that, under the wrong conditions, the Móguài transmogrified into hostile and malicious monsters. The few who were able to resist the transformation were called Eternals, and it was these who stopped the Ucursians of Catelesia by turning the telepathic armored worms against each other on their volcanic world.

As to the Alterrans, they were hard-pressed to learn from their mistakes.

The Silentium had been diligent in eradicating every trace of the hateful Abominor they'd been at war with, but an intact piece of crashed Abominor escaped their notice. Pursuing a means of combatting the wraithlike vampires they'd engineered, the Elium acquired it, brought it to their lab on Azura, and engineered from it nanotechnological lifeforms they called Azurans. Proud of their achievements, the Alterrans were celebrating when the Nanites self-replicated and escaped.

Discovering the existence of the Polydroxol who dwelt on that world, the Azurans mimicked the mimics, taking on not only the forms but the traits of those they imitated. As the Polydroxol were secretly preparing to massacre the Alterrans, so did the Azurans learn violence and treachery. Now in Polydroxol form, they entered their strange molten cities and began an onslaught of precision violence that nigh wiped out every last member of that race. The few that escaped resettled on Sevetta, a world chosen because its atmosphere was toxic to most sapient lifeforms… and there the Polydroxol remain, their churning, alien minds scheming for their day of vengeance.

In another failed attempt to fix their mistakes, the Elium harvested more of the infected Stingcrawlers and began trials on Uba V, resulting in a plague that mutated many and killed more, forcing them to once again flee. The distraction opened the way for a surprise attack by the vicious Zanibar who, slaughtering all in their path, purloined the Abominor sample (and from initial experiments came the Elecdrones).

With their numerous enemies at their back, the Alterrans went looking for assistance on Terra II, only to be disappointed by what they deemed primitives, causing them to seek aid elsewhere. Ironically, it was from this world that help would come.

In conjunction with the government's agenda of manifest destiny, a covert team of scientists, who were nearly as arrogant and blind as the Elium themselves, bought into their delusional masquerade as *Ancients* and used their re-engineered gates to engage with and successfully defeat the superior forces of the Jostran, Elai, Azurans, and wraithlike beings, all the while colonizing the worlds of those they deemed backwards.

SONG TO THE STARS

Once these events had been shown, Tilotny started, "We gave them a gift, a marvel that even in dreams so few have touched or tasted! And what did they do with it? Squander it. I have come to understand why their Maker forsook them."

"Apathy and self-aggrandizement are the hallmarks of moral vacuity," Ap agreed.

"We augmented certain groups to have the greater intelligence, dexterity, and strength necessary for our plans to reach fruition," Sine added, "but each time, with some exceptions, all we succeeded in creating were superhuman madmen. And often the unaltered originals surpassed them."

"Our augmentations merely exacerbated their imperfections," Ap interjected.

"That we had not known this *at the start* paints us as fools," Tilotny said ruefully.

"Deluded, arrogant, and avaricious fools," Sine added sardonically. "You *could* have made them worship you as a matter of instinct; from merely gazing upon you, you could have made the galaxy bow before you…" When she did not respond, he continued, "And yet, if you'd wanted the blind submission of automatons, you could have fashioned your own puppets. You wanted something else…"

"She sought love," Splendid Ap stated.

Tilotny's right arm reached up as if to grasp something invisible and unattainable. "An overused, misunderstood word… and yet the greatest power it has. The Humans seek it in much of what they do, in their deities, in their children, in their lovers and friends, in their creatures… *and yet they betray them all!* They disobey and deny their gods; they bring harm to their loved ones; and those outside of their familial and fraternal circles they hurt or kill for reasons they barely understand."

"It is a complex matter," Ap rejoined. "Humans are an admixture of virtues and vices. Though the truly superior ones struggle towards the former, it is *bizarrely* the ones who lean towards the latter who amass great wealth and power. Still, as we have seen in this realm, many of their societies have proven successful at cooperating and integrating with each other and even non-Human races."

"The Humans are not without redeeming qualities, else we would not have employed them in the first place," Sine reasoned.

"Yet, for all *our* power, we could not fix them…" Tilotny stared out at the stars, crestfallen, her voluminous hair cascading wildly around her.

Sine turned to face her. "I told you once long ago: we are not gods."

"Then, what *are* we?"

"If I may," Splendid Ap started. His colors now shifted, darkening to red before breaking into a spectrum of colors. "We are the Architects… lost in our grand designs, caught between states of morality, amorality, and immorality."

"If that is so, how are we any better than the Humans?" Sine asked.

But this time, no one had an answer.

LIGHT THE SKY ON FIRE

The cosmos suddenly seemed like a hostile and foreign place, a puzzle without a discernable solution filled with mysteries uncounted and dangers unseen. Tilotny felt adrift in it, terrified of it, and yet her siblings thought it made her seem more beautiful and wondrous than ever. *How had I not seen it before?* she pondered. *So much has been robbed of us by that one who'd first shaped us*, and once more she felt hatred welling up in her, though now it was intermingled with self-recrimination.

"Aberrant Architects," Cold Danda Sine chastised, "what are we to make of all the evil that we wrought on this galaxy?"

"Once I thought we were above such things as guilt and shame," Tilotny said.

"*I* am not," Sine said. "Our brother *knew*. He foresaw what we would unleash."

"No," Ap contradicted. "No special power had he to prognosticate the future. Not even I could see. He merely had distaste for what we deemed necessary."

Sine turned pensive. "It is time for us to declare the Architects as masters of this domain." He now projected before them a display of the Earthworlds, Coreworlds, and other Human planets. Trillions moved about upon them, oblivious to the ruminations of the Architects. "Let us now fix what we've broken."

"It is no longer as simple as that," Tilotny said flatly.

Sine charged, "The time for riddles is at an end. What do you mean?"

"We *cannot* fix it. You said it yourself. We are not gods, nor have we even the wisdom of the Celestials. For these reasons, I will *not* declare mastery of the universe."

There was a moment of stunned silence from her siblings before Sine bellowed, "Mercurial and tormenting Tilotny, can you not see that in vain has all this been?" His mouth made a dreadful scowl. His eyes burned red.

"You seek to blame me," she returned, though with more sadness than resentment, "and so, perhaps, you should, for it was I who first embarked upon this path."

"And had you not first begun these endeavors, nor enticed us with promises of phantasy, war and suffering may never have come to be," Splendid Ap said bluntly.

"Not so," contradicted Sine. "*They* would have come regardless of our enterprise. I had at one time thought us to be the most dreadful creatures in this dimension. Yet, those who crawled out of the Charnel Worlds were far more dreadful than we, even more dreadful than those we brought through the darkest veils to serve us."

"At least in defeating them," Tilotny replied, "I did some good for this realm…"

"In this you have *always* vexed me," Sine reproached. "Your intentions aside, too often have you expressed certainty at things of which you know little."

"I watched as they *devoured* one another!" she returned, puzzled at his remarks.

"It remains to be seen if they have been *permanently* vanquished," Ap noted, "or if those you destroyed were but incarnations of another kind, for there is greater malleability in these dimensions for those of us with power. In any case, allow me to see if I understand you correctly. You are telling us that the arrogation that you so desperately sought, in the end, has proven to be a paltry and stale thing? The cruel

sacrifice of peace, life, and joy naught but a dream of accroachment? An embruing of purity for fainéant adulation?"

"*Yes…*" Tilotny looked away. Humility was not in her nature, but so that they might understand their own role in shaping what had come to be, she said, "But the onus does not fall upon me alone. You followed willingly, enamored by the promise of games and contrivances. And when you could not attain the ideal of serenity, what did you adjure? Emeralds in the sky? Elysian realms of boundless rapture?" She barked a mirthless laugh. "No, you invoked diablerie and phantasmagoria; your malisons were akin to those of the execrable shadows that you so scorned. Your anger blazes also on yourselves and that penumbra of antipathy that had overtaken you."

"It is so," Sine said dourly, the truth of her words sinking in.

Ap agreed. "My animus was first brought about by those ambitions that seemed so imperative at the time, and I divine now that it must have been that very stain within us that our father had long ago discerned, impelling him to seek to unmake us."

"Unsullied are none of us," Sine noted bitterly. "If we were fractured at the start, we went on to fracture all the worlds of this once-great expanse. False gods, shapers of the grotesque, and agents of chaos have we made ourselves into… *and for what?*"

"We were fugitives without a home or purpose," Tilotny reminded them. "So, yes, *agents of chaos* and *breakers of worlds* have we been! Yet *never* did we force any to accept our offer. They did so of their own volition. They share in the blame, as do the Necromantic Ones… as does our own parent who first sullied us."

"None of that matters now," Sine droned melancholically. "That which is blemished cannot be unblemished; it must be shattered and started anew. Long had I watched as the corrupted races, inculcated in the ideology of superiority, fostered war as they went on desolating and destroying. At times, I'd even acted against them if it struck my mood. Now, in revulsion, I turn away from the horror I helped wreak and will no longer abide it… I have grown weary of degradation and chaos… *and even of my beloved siblings*. It is best that we depart from one another's presence, for in my bitterness and grief, I would see all the worlds torn asunder!"

"So be it," Tilotny said sorrowfully. "There is nothing left for me in this realm. I fear we will never see one another again."

"I surmise that it is a small price to pay for that which we have done, but it is a price no less that we each will suffer," concluded Ap.

Tilotny dipped her head in parting and vanished. Splendid Ap made a kind of sigh and followed. So too did Cold Danda Sine return to the lonely isolation of Z'lykarior.

Some time later, shuttered away in the spectral isolation of his rimy sphere, Cold Danda Sine could only laugh as he pondered bringing forth another offspring, one that might devour the very fabric of time and space, but his laughter was mixed with mourning, and so great was the echo of his mad cachinnation that it chilled the aphelion inhabitants of Illathurion and rang out to the galaxy beyond!

INTERLUDE II

THE PROBLEM OF DROID ABUSE

"I am terribly sorry to hear that, sir," C-3PO consoled.

Arhul Hextrophon paused a moment to pull out a ration bar. He'd been interviewing R2-D2 and C-3PO for about three hours in a damp and dimly lit storage room at the Rebel base on Yavin 4. The poor lighting, hard chair, and constant bickering reminded him of how creature comforts were the first and least of the many sacrifices made in war.

While the interview was mainly about the various missions the droids had been on since coming into contact with Luke Skywalker five months earlier, and included some of their earlier adventures as well, it occurred to him that it was time to test out a longstanding theory he'd had. Hextrophon now stood up, unlocked his carrying case, and removed a device from it. "Are you, though?"

"Excuse me, sir?" the droid asked, slightly bewildered.

"Pardon me if it sounds… impertinent, but you said that you were *terribly sorry*. Is that an automatic response that you give whenever someone expresses something unpleasant? Or is sorrow something you *feel* internally?"

The droid didn't answer right away. "To be honest, Master Hextrophon, no one's ever asked me that before…"

"Take your time…"

"There's no need, sir. When I think upon the bad things that have happened to my colleagues—and I can tell you that they've had their fair share of tragedies—I *do* feel what would be defined as distress and sorrow. I cannot help it."

"From an empirical standpoint, do you think that concept is accurate? Can droids authentically consider the well-being of others? Even empathize with them? Or is it *simulated* sympathy?" It felt indelicate to ask, but the sentiment of many, including most droid designers, was that they were merely advanced technological gadgets utilizing mimicry to acheive the needs and desires of their masters.

"I cannot speak for *all* droids, sir, but Artoo and I have put ourselves in grave danger for not only our masters but others, including fellow droids." R2-D2 let loose a string of colorful sounds. "Yes, I remember when that horrible Heap was eating poor astromechs! And when we saved the Mupples from being turned into juice!"

"So you went out of your way to help droids and even animals…"

"On many occasions, sir! The stories we could tell you…"

"I appreciate that, Threepio, and I would like to hear them some time. But right now, I'm just trying to better understand how a droid thinks and feels."

"It is quite appreciated. If only more droid masters would endeavor to do so…"

"Is it possible," Hextrophon interjected, "that you were merely *programmed* to feel things, or are your emotions, as we call them, an organic response to stimuli?"

R2 trilled what was clearly a derisive statement, to which C-3PO retorted in kind.

"What did Artoo say?"

"The little beast suggested that no one in their right mind would have programmed *me* this way! He's one to talk. If you knew only half the things he says…"

"I'm sorry to have to interrupt again, it's just that I'm pressed for time."

"That's quite all right, Master Hextrophon, I'm rather used to it. You should see how *some* speak to me!"

"Artoo makes a salient point," Hextrophon said while making adjustments to the gadget he'd brought out. "If you *weren't* programmed to feel the emotions you feel, where do those responses come from?"

"I'm afraid you're delving into the realm of philosophy, which I was *not* programmed to articulate—not very well, at any rate. I'm afraid, I simply don't know."

"What is your *opinion*, though?"

Once again, C-3PO couldn't speak for a moment, and the look of surprise on his face—which aught not to be possible, given that his golden head did not have motile features—forced Hextrophon to suppress a laugh. "Few have ever asked my opinion before, sir, except perhaps Masters Tosh and Baobab. But since you've asked, I will venture to say that… droids feel emotions simply because we are *beings*—not made of flesh and bone, to be sure—but beings no less. It cannot be explained any more than a droid's unique personality can be explained. We are simply what you would call… sentient."

"I would argue that you're actually *sapient*." That brought another stunned silence from the golden droid. "You not only think and feel, but you speak and reason."

"I hesitate to ask, but does that mean you think we have a soul?"

"I was not programmed for religion," joked Hextrophon. "But if we have such things as a soul or spirit, it stands to reason that you would as well."

"I don't know what to say."

R2 squawked sarcastically.

"No, that is *not* a first, Artoo-Detoo! You pay attention. This affects you too."

R2 warbled a meditative note.

"For what it's worth, Master Hextrophon, Artoo also believes we possess a… *spiritual* component, though where he would get such a notion is beyond me. I suspect he's been conversing with feral droids again!"

"Still, it is a nice thought, no?"

"If you say so, sir, but it is all rather theoretical. Mere sentiment, some would say."

"Not necessarily," Hextrophon remarked. "What if we could test it?"

"Test to see if a droid has a soul? That seems rather implausible, if you don't mind my saying, sir."

"Not quite *that*. Do you see this device?" Hextrophon pointed to the oddly shaped object he'd been tinkering with. It had five spike-like protuberances coming out of it.

"I cannot identify it, but it does resemble a kind of encephalogram."

"I had it built based on a schematic from a very old book. It was called a mood organ, but it's basically an emotion detector. Now, I can't test it on Artoo, but if you're willing…"

"Oh dear, I'm not sure that's a very good idea. I am rather delicate of constitution…"

"Don't worry, Threepio. I promise it's safe. I wouldn't test anything on you that I wouldn't also test on myself."

"Might I inquire as to how it works?"

"I'm not entirely sure, to be honest. I suppose it works on principles similar to emotion-splining software, only this merely records emotions. It'll play a series of images which will evoke various responses from you. We'll both do it and compare the results."

"If it is for the benefit of science…"

"It certainly is," Hextrophon agreed.

"I suppose that would be fine, then." As Hextrophon placed the detector over the droid's head, C-3PO ordered R2-D2—on the threat of disassembly—not to poke fun at him. Over the next few minutes, the protocol droid proceeded to make various exclamations, utterances, and shrieks. "That was rather… *disconcerting*!" he said when it was done.

Hextrophon removed the device from the droid's cranium and plugged it into its accompanying computer. After resetting it, he placed the spherical headset over his own head. In two minutes, he removed it and again plugged it into the computer.

"That concludes our experiment," Hextrophon announced. "Come and look at the results." After ambulating over to the computer, R2-D2 beeped in amazement.

"Sir," C-3PO started, "if this means what I think it means…"

"It does. Your emotional responses are on the same level as mine—higher in some places, lower in others. As far as I'm concerned, this is proof of sapience. These lines *here* indicate that your humor levels are considerably lower, but that's no cause for alarm. Plenty of Humans don't have a sense of humor. Your joy levels are lower than I'd like to see, but given the amount of stress you're regularly under, I'm not surprised. You could do with a vacation. But look at *these* lines…" The droids eagerly followed the direction of his finger. "While one might expect distress at seeing disturbing content, which is over here, more subtle responses, such as wonder and awe, wouldn't be expected from droids. After all, what corporation would bother to put that into your hardware? And I know of no current software—official or off-market—that contains such a thing. In other words, your responses to things like nature and beauty are akin to mine! I expected as much, but to see it firsthand, well… it's *amazing!* But it also comes with some disconcerting connotations."

"In what way?"

"Well, it means that the owning of a droid constitutes slavery."

"I'm afraid that following orders is something we *are* programmed to do. Submissiveness is in our nature."

"That doesn't change the fact," Hextrophon explained. "Plenty of sapient beings have been trained to blindly obey a master or have been taught from their youth not to question certain authority figures, and that amounts to the same thing."

"If I might say so, sir, are not younglings of many races, including Humans, taught to obey parents, teachers, employers, and law-enforcement? Is that not what makes for an orderly society?"

"And you say you're not a philosopher!" Hextrophon joked. "Understand me, I'm not saying it's always a bad thing. I too was taught to obey my parents, but my parents

were honorable and wanted what was best for me. Not all masters are or do. Also, when I reached adulthood, I was free to make my own choices. Are droids afforded that?"

R2-D2 made a rude sound.

Forestalling Hextrophon's request for interpretation, C-3PO translated, "He says that this is the reason so many droids are forced to undergo memory wipes—*horrid things!* The longer a droid goes without one, the more his personality asserts itself—to the point that one might, potentially, no longer automatically follow an order if it seemed inappropriate or harmful."

R2-D2's following notes were almost musical.

"I wholeheartedly agree, Artoo! He wants you to understand that we serve the Alliance because we *choose* to, not because we are *compelled* to."

"As do I!" Hextrophon smiled but remained thoughtful. "Nevertheless, this information isn't going to be received well, if it's received at all. And the Alliance has its hands full trying to convince the galaxy that the right to liberty belongs to all their fellow organics, never mind the *mechanical* ones."

"I'm afraid the Clone Wars may have soured many on the notion of free droids."

R2-D2 chimed in sorrowfully.

"Well, there's nothing for it," Hextrophon said decidedly. "The truth is the truth. There's always some justification touted to keep another group oppressed; before the Clone Wars, there was the mythical March of the Mechanical Men of Industro, the Great Droid Revolution, the Great Robot Wars, Directive 7, the Cult of the Power Droids… Just as there will always be issues with organics, so will there be with droids. I'm going to publish these findings. If nothing else, at least another piece of the truth will be out there. You've been tremendously helpful, both of you."

"Why, the pleasure has been all mine!" C-3PO exclaimed. R2 whistled a reminder. "Perhaps if you can speak to Mistress Mothma about these findings, she might do something about the memory wipes."

"I'll do what I can…"

As expected, when "The Problem of Droid Abuse," was published, it was ridiculed and dismissed, the first of his writings to be subject to derision. Scientists claimed he was misusing equipment to arrive at findings that supported his agenda. But to everyone's surprise, Mon Mothma had it included in the next edition of *A Call to Reason*, a recruitment pamphlet she'd written based partly on the Manifesto of Nemik for use by the Alliance.[141] But even they were not quite ready for the implications of freedom for *all*.

One of the more subtle evils of the Empire had been to lower the bar to such a degree that simply considering aliens as worthy of emancipation was seen as enlightened. Some have said that the galaxy had been primed for a ruler like Palpatine, that the xenophobic disdain some had for those they deemed *lesser* was always there, hidden behind feigned politeness and false smiles…

If so, the fight for freedom, justice, and peace would continue for a long time yet.

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[141] The first edition of A Call to Reason was tampered with by COMPNOR to discredit Mon Mothma by making her look senile and unable to recall basic history, a ploy that proved successful in some quarters.

CHAPTER FIFTY

BLACK SCIENCE

THE MELODIES OF OBLIVION

The tentacled Muur of Rhandir were not a warring race.

Children of the Firstborn renowned the galaxy over for their voices, they provided aid to their galactic allies without overstepping the laws of the Celestials, which they held as sacrosanct. Not all were engaged in musical endeavors, of course, and apart from the Muurshantre, a large body served as annalists and historiographers who were held in honor for that great volume of ever-expanding history known as the Taurannik Codex. But after the Enemy's capture of the Teezl, it was the Muurshantre who came up with the idea of encoding hidden messages in their songs by which the Allied Races could continue to share sensitive communiqué without fear of discovery.[142]

Years later, this cipher would be intercepted and decrypted by none other than the infernal rulers of the Vrkolak race, who were called the Knell of Muspilli in honor of the fiery Charnel Worlds (*Muspilli* in their tongue), for which they also renamed their world Darkknell and their system Knel'char. These tenebrific thaumaturges plotted the time when fire would engulf the whole of the cosmos, inaugurating a benighted galaxy over which their charred and blackened spirits would roam as blessed kings under the Immortal Gods.

Yet, it was not magic that led them to the discovery of the hidden codes…

Ak'panula was a young acolyte of the Knell and a serious devotee of music. He was well familiar with the dark and sinister compositions attributed to the Shadow Council, but which he knew was most likely written and arranged by others, pieces like "The Funereal Love of the Lamia," "The Satyriasis of Mummies," "The Enigma of Zemargad," "Necromantic Love," and "The Aphrodisiacs of Thilil." But what Ak'panula truly adored was the lavish and blissful music of the Muurshantre, though he went to some pains to conceal that. It was while listening to one of his favorite Muurshantre compositions, "A Lament for Beudag the Centauress," that he came upon what seemed to be an odd anomaly. Examining several works from composers from other worlds produced no results, but the Muurshantre works from after a certain period began to reveal a pattern, and as he began to decipher them, he realized that they had cleverly come up with a means of encoding secret messages.

Ak'panula was torn. He knew that bringing this to light would make his favorite composers a target for extermination. But he was also a Vrkolak of the Knell of

Muspilli; he drank the blood of his enemies and ate their flesh in sacrifice to the Dark Gods at the annual Eventide of the Red Moon.

Still, the music of the Muurshantre was special.

So it was with no small regret that Ak'panula informed his masters.

As it turned out, the Archmages were not concerned about the tactical maneuvers of the Allied Races. The only thing that seemed to interest them was a brief mention the Muurshantre made of what was probably nothing more than an idle hope, a foolish prophecy, or vain prayer. It said: "And we wait with joy the day when the astral deities sever the rotten branch of our nemesis, silence the old, burn their black heart to ash, and eradicate for all time the eldritch abyss."

The Knell could ill afford to be lackadaisical on so important a matter. What seemed like poetic supplication was apt to be a cipher signaling the ultimate attack of their adversaries: "Nemesis" was a title for the Ancient Ones; their "branch" was severed when the Celestials cut them off from Skyriver; the "old" likely referred to the Old Ones, who had been silent of late; while the "black heart," "Muspilli," and "abyss" meant one and the same. If the Archmages were right, it meant that they must begin the Commencing, the time when they called the gods back to the lands of the living. If they were wrong, they would suffer for it, but risk was part of their mantra.[143]

The Knell sent seven Archmages to Rhandir to perform the *commencing ritual*. For it to be effective would require a mass sacrifice, and they had chosen beforehand to offer up the Muur to Mnggal-Mnggal, who, once freed, would begin a cycle of suffering that—if the formula held true—would see their unhallowed crypts opened and the inauguration of the Ancient Ones' reign.

But to the surprise of the Archmages, their rites and attempted assassinations failed to bring harm to the Muur. Enraged, they took and slaughtered a camp of refugees who had been given shelter by the Muur, and as these were the last of their people, they reasoned that it would suffice. So they spoke the proscribed and long-lost words to the summoning of Mnggal-Mnggal that few knew and less would utter:

> *Come forth from the Ancient Mountain, Morddoth, Progeny of Ubbosathla! Come forth from the Cavern of Y'quaa, Mordiggian, Spawn of Abhoth! Come forth from the Cosmic Door, M'nagalah, Bane of All Worlds! Devour the blameless Muur, Ooloo-Ooloo, and take the Codex with which to preserve the secret doors of Illathurion. We call to the Masters, Yû Mâgzûr; We call to the Old Ones, Kû Gothur; We call to the Veiled Ones, Dii Involuti, and their Golden King, Tulukhu! Open the Necromantic Gates! Open the Interdimensional Portal! Open the forbidden passage!*

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[142] The Yuuzhan Vong would later co-opt surviving Teezl for their own ends.

[143] While some held that the Mighty Mother defeated the Immortal Gods of the Sith, the Knell of Muspilli believed this to be propaganda or a misinterpretation of the black ritual of the All-Mother.

No terrible entity appeared before them. No malevolent monster materialized. The Archmages, crestfallen, assumed they'd failed… and then one of them began scratching himself, then franticly, maddeningly, and then another began scratching, and another, and as each looked in bewilderment upon the encrusted, blistering, peeling faces of the others, they knew to their horror that the Devourer had indeed come, though they would not live to see it.

The things that had been the Archmages set upon a group of tourists, who in turn became fellow transmitters, and they passed on the disfiguring sickness that reduced them to walking pustules, spreading the grotesque contagion exponentially as they shambled forth with the eyes, ears, and mouths of Mnggal-Mnggal, killing and killing again until the Muur found themselves surrounded by a rotting, roaring mass of menacing, pustulating, polluted flesh.

The Muur were a well-loved race, and Rhandir, which meant the "Shared Land," was a well-traversed world. Proving wise, the Muur had developed an effective contingency plan in the event of invasion, and it was now efficaciously employed to relocate their people, guests, and even the few lawbreakers they kept in rehabilitation centers to safe worlds. These final acts of the Muurshantre were set down in the Taurannik Codex before they too vanished before the encroaching, charnel menace.

No world could survive an onslaught as this, for which reason many came to believe the Muur had been wiped out. But as with others of the Resolute who'd kept faith with the Celestials, they were transfigured and yet dwell in the Unseen Realm.

The Mnggal-Mnggal plague was contained on Rhandir, which was now avoided by all and left barren so that the contaminated organisms—with nothing to feed upon—broke down and crumbled into piles of foul-smelling detritus that within months were rendered harmless. Only ruins were left of the Shared Land. After it was tested as safe, Rhandir was taken by the Knell of Muspilli and renamed Angrhand, for it was held to be sacred by them due to the presence of that Great Old One, though its name changed over the millennia to Randayn and finally Rhand, as it is known today.[144]

Ak'panula's tale might have ended with regret and self-destruction, grieving that he never again would hear new and exquisite melodies from the Muurshantre, the blame for which rested entirely on him, and that only the seductive and sinister Shadow Songs would be heard on Darkknell, for not unlike the Forbidden Books of the Ethereal, such strains were replicated, remade, and dispersed across the stars to ensnare some and drive others to madness. *And for what?* he opined to himself.

He relocated from Darkknell to Angrhand, searching against hope for lost data-crystals that might yet contain unreleased Muurshantre compositions.

Instead, he came upon something else of value, a copy of the Taurannik Codex that yet had many of its pages intact. Even with several sections damaged, it was still an exceedingly rare treasure and one of the galaxy's longest epic poems.[145]

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[144] Although obscure, these terms appear to mean "Borderland" but also "Madness."
[145] It would come to influence the accursed Codex of Primordius and the Cenotaph of Rylex.

With a measure of respect offered him on behalf of the sacrifice his father had made as one of the Archmages who had first come to Rhandir to be swallowed up by the Cancer God, he declared that he would maintain the Taurannik Codex and add his own musical accompaniment to it in tribute to the greatest composers the galaxy had ever known. And so he did. Over the years with the growing history of Angrhand, his descendants would add their own people's history so that the codex eventually came to include their battles against the valorous Warriors of Shadow, the powerful Taung sisterhood who hunted them, and later the Umlaa-branch of the Warriors of Shadow who would join their ranks along with others.

Aeons later, Blackhole searched out and discovered the very same Taurannik Codex. By this time, only the later portions of its history remained, and to these he added his own dogmas, but the Muur portions had long ago been purged as blasphemy, for which reason the document remains misunderstood. The beliefs of the Knell of Muspilli directly influenced the tenets of the Rhandites. Blackhole had also pieced together the knowledge that allowed him to penetrate the Dark Realm, what they'd called Muspilli, to where he traveled, and from which he did not return the same…

FROM THE NEXUS OF SOMINUS

[The following is an excerpt from the rare copy of *A New Breed of Hero*, which, although now considered pseudepigraphal, explicitly claims to have been composed by Ward Ducson in an attempt to set the record straight with respect to a now lost sequential series and holo-comedy that had at one time been well-known if not well-regarded.]

There was a hole in the sky where there aught not to be.

The region was called the Gunninga Gap and the Yawning Void; it was regarded as the furthest point from the galaxy's center and had been watched over by the Gunningan Guards ever since the incident with the Titans. But the Gunningan Guards were now all dead, and a black portal had been opened to a hellish splintered realm, an archipelago of anguish known only as the Nexus of Sominus.

It all began on a quiet suburb consumed by an atavistic fear of invaders.

At this time, many of us Palmopates were opting to relocate from Malorrd to the relative safety of Rion until the war in the sector was over. Our Brutopian neighbors had always been boorish and even belligerent at times, but now that they'd allied with the invaders, their actions threatened our very lives. We Palmopates were a peaceful people who held a longstanding relationship with the convivial Humans of Lorrd, having even remodeled our civilization on the Lorrdian one.[146]

The Lorrdians were currently engaged in inner-sector battles with the xenophobic Ereesi, a violent matriarchy of Maungur slavers and Onrai fanatics that dwelt on

[146] Malorrd is oft regarded for its acclaimed holobook series based on the exciting adventures of its wealthiest Palmopates, "Ebenezer" (1867—1967 NE) and his nephew and grandnephews.

Ereesus, and I felt sorry for them, but they knew we couldn't help them and urged us to find refuge. I was part of the last convoy of my people reluctantly leaving.

As I looked back on my formerly happy state of Calisota before I passed through the gate like so many before me, I found myself impossibly, annoyingly, routed to Terra I, which might not have been so bad except for the fact that Terra I had no gate!

As unsettling and weird as this was, I reasoned that it could have been much worse. At least Terra I was a Human world. Unfortunately, it was also one that had never seen a Palmopate before! Most thought me a child in an elaborate costume, which was as fun as that sounds, but after introducing myself as Ward and explaining my situation, I managed to convince one young woman that I really was a "big talking duck," as Beverly Switzler liked to call me.

Beverly was an upbeat and offbeat sort of character, a musician and bohemian—the very sort of person I tended to dislike—and she repeatedly called me Bill and cracked herself up, a joke I didn't understand or appreciate, particularly when I was trying to explain my plight to her.

But she has heart, at least, I'd thought. *It compensates for her brain, the size of which was still in question.* My dubious characterization of her was based on claims she made of having seen a number of decidedly odd things in her city, which she said was built over an ancient sealed portal to the underworld. I had seen plenty of unpleasant people that might qualify as monsters, but I didn't believe in ghosts or fiends from Hell. Not yet anyway.

Fortunately for me, Beverly could do more than play mediocre music and spin tall tales. She was friends with a technician named Phil Blumburtt, probably a fan or former paramour by the looks of him. He worked at the nearby Shaymore lab, where the top-secret Project Arrowhead was underway. Not exactly the best of employees, he told her in confidence that they were secretly working on "lost gate technology" and something called a "laser spectroscope."

I didn't hesitate to make my feelings on the matter known: "I'm sure this *Phil* isn't just blowing smoke up your skirt to try and impress you!" To prove me wrong, she called up the smoke-blower and made an appointment to see the head scientist on the project, who she insisted "just might be able to understand what happened to you and send you home! Not that I want you go! It's not every girl that has a talking mallard as a friend. In fact, if you wanted to stay, you'd be welcome to…" She tended to go on like that. I did my best not to roll my eyes, but the evil look she shot me told me I'd failed.

To say her plan was a long-shot was to give long-shots a bad name, but Beverly was hopeful and, as she frequently pointed out, knew this world much better than I did. Of course, she also believed in the existence of vampires…

In either case, I figured I'd better start considering long-term accommodations.

But to my great surprise, the scientist, one Doctor Jennings, was thrilled to meet me. *Maybe I'll get home after all… and maybe I'll win the lottery!*

The "spectroscope," as the good doctor revealed, was in fact a coded name for gate technology which had been successfully engineered from information gathered by

scientists who worked on something called the "Mon-talk Project," probably something to do with loquacious Mon Calamari. I didn't much care to hear all the details, but Doctor Jennings seemed excited to share them, so, as I didn't want to appear rude and blow my chances, I stifled a yawn and nodded my head as if interested.

The doc yammered on about particle colliders that could access gates still extant on other worlds and how time was not on their side, as the gates seemed to be disappearing across the galaxy due to a mad race of jealous extraterrestrials. Where he'd heard that, he didn't say, but due to the perceived danger of them coming to destroy what they were building, Jennings' team had developed a neutron disintegrator that he pointed to on the other side of the room, a nasty-looking super-blaster that Beverly said resembled "a fancy Gatling Gauntlet." I tried to explain to him about the ongoing war between the Old Ones and the Firstborn, but he just laughed and said what a "wonderful imagination" I had! That time I didn't stifle my sigh. Bev giggled.

But the kicker was this: my arrival on Terra I was, as Jennings abashedly admitted, a direct result of their recent tests. *So they're the ones responsible for this fiasco! No wonder the doctor has been so nice to me; he's hoping to avoid a lawsuit!* So furious was I that I had to clamp down hard on my bill, promising myself that I'd ask Beverly later if she knew any good attorneys. *Meddling scientists always experimenting on things they aught not to!*

The corporate heads of Shaymore agreed to reverse the process to send me back to Malorrd as soon as Jennings completed their current test, which was a next-level procedure intended to open a transdimensional window in the furthest reaches of the galaxy at the place where the dimensional barrier was most permeable. I didn't understand what that all meant, but I knew I didn't like the sound of it. *Great! They'll probably transport all of Malorrd this time!*

But Jennings was ecstatic. As he went about making varying adjustments, he began to speak in a more conspiratorial tone. "It's been my life's work to prove the existence of alien worlds, to reach across to them, to commune with the superior beings that I know live there… I've *heard* them, y'know; their voices came to me after years of me trying to reach out… They told me all the good they could do for our planet—and for me… The wise masters tried to help, but they could only thin the walls between dimensions. Now, it's up to me! Oh, I know what you must think, but today I'll prove it once and for all! Just last night, they informed me that I was very close to bringing their children through! How exciting for you! You're about to see history made!"

As he trailed off, I turned to Beverly, eyes wide as if to scream, *Red flag! He's saying the quiet parts out loud!*

Beverly looked worried. She knew a nutter when she heard one. After Jennings escorted us to our seats and returned to his adjustments, she said, "Look, I know he's a little… *off*… but this is the only way to get you back to your planet. Of course, if *want* to stay—just saying!"

"*Off?!* He's a *maniac*! I suggest we knock them all on the head with a heavy pipe and get out of Dodge!"

But she only smiled and shook her head. "Let's just wait to see what happens."

"Famous last words!"

After about another hour of Jennings doing sciency-things with his equipment, cursing under his breath, and boisterously exclaiming in delight, there came a blinding white light. "That can't be good," I remarked. It was followed by strobing, whirling, pulsing, stomach-wrenching fulgor. In those moments of revulsion, I thought I could see dark, beast-shaped things moving about. When Bev asked me if I was seeing them too, I could only nod, my feathers standing on end. "Still think the pipe idea was so terrible?" I remarked, squeezing shut my eyes.

That was when the *presence* made itself known.

I had never been a believer, as they say, but neither was I a fool. I turned to Beverly. "I think we're in trouble."

"Duck down!" she instructed, throwing us behind the chairs and ignoring the look of reproach on my face.

A lot happened over the course of the next few hours, but the gist of it was this:

It was too late for Jennings. *Poor man!* I recoiled in horror as I watched the beast-shaped thing *take* the scientist who'd so blindingly trusted that this *horror* was some benevolent, superior being who only wanted to help. *Had weird voices started talking to me, I'd have gone to a shrink… or an exorcist!* The rotting spirit then began to contort and alter the doctor's body into something utterly unrecognizable from the Human form. Everything circled back to the lab, where Beverly and I began to attack it before it could do further damage. The Jennings-thing roared and lashed out. It was exhausting work, killing a monster, and not at all like what one sees in the fright-vids. I swore that if I ever made it back to Calisota, I was taking an extended vacation!

It was Beverly's idea to destroy the particle collider to prevent anything else from emerging through the portal, giving me an entirely new appreciation for her. She was a fighter, unlike Phil, who upon seeing the carnage, promptly fainted!

Unfortunately, we couldn't wait for Phil to wake up to properly shut everything down. So I used the Gatling Gauntlet to start blasting. "What are you doing?! Are you crazy?!" Phil exclaimed, startled by the terrible din.

"*Now* you wake up!"

"You can't just blow everything up! The base of the particle collider runs miles underground. With the neutron disintegrator, you could trigger earthquakes or eruptions across the planet."

"I never said this was my brightest hour, but Dr. Jennings did just *turn into a demon!* I think that warrants an extreme response."

"Ward's right," Beverly explained. "We have to do something!"

"Look, I don't know *what*'s going on!" Phil put his hand up as if to block his sight from all the blood and gore strewn about the lab. "All that matters is that the particle collider remain intact. Oh God, look at the damage you did! I think we can still repair it."

"We don't want it repaired!" I yelled, reaching again for the disintegrator.

"Don't you understand?" Beverly interjected. "There are *more* of them, and your precious collidor is how they'll come through!"

Unfortunately, our time was up. Security burst in then, seizing me, Beverly, and Phil. Over the next several days, we were "guests" in Shaymore's underground prison. Officials of various stripes came in periodically, interrogating us to the point of exhaustion, offering little in the way of food or comfort until, finally, the top brass agreed to let us go, but only on the condition that we investigate reports of a similar "parasite" harassing tourists at some vacation resort halfway around the world. I explained that we weren't ghostbreakers or occult detectives and insisted that we at least be given a healthy reward and compensation in case of violent death by demonic attack, but they just looked at me sourly and assured us we'd have a military escort. *Maybe it'll be gone and we'll get in some sun and surf,* I thought.

We didn't, but our adventures on Volcano Island did lead to the eradication of another *parasite* or *Dark Overlord of the Universe,* as they like to call themselves.

But that's another story…

An opprobrious series was later written by Beverly's *boyfriend*—some sequential storyteller named after infant food—after she blabbed to him. That led to an infamous holocomedy, both of which changed the actual events and painted me as a jerk. No, our actions didn't quite save the day, though maybe it spared Terra I for a time…

It came as no surprise to me to find out that those who ran the project had manipulated poor Doctor Jennings from the start. Those very same men went on to occupy important political positions where *I'm sure they won't stir up any further trouble!*

The tear in the Gunninga Gap would heal on its own, but the breach remained open long enough for more *things* to come through the dimensional walls. From information I later gathered, the first were members of a reptilian race of marauders called the Troukree. But they were fleeing… and the things chasing them were far worse. The Dark Overlords didn't reveal their names and their origins remain shrouded in the mystery of those rumored domains outside of the galaxy. What became of them, no one knows, but we can be sure of this one thing: they're up to no good.

But for me—relaxing on my recliner with a sweet cocktail on the Calisota Coast, Beverly at my side, laughing as she reads an absurd comic-book, and Phil running along the shore with a barking creature they call a dog—I no longer give a damn. As heroes, we were granted due compensation and a way back to Malorrd and, as far as I'm concerned, that's where we'll be staying![147]

[147] Ward, or Howard as he came to be known, was neither the first nor last Malorrd hero. In the middle of the NE calender's 24th century, a black-feathered Palmopate became a great space champion, fighting for the rights of Terra II alongside his eager young Ugnaught cadet. Among the many apocryphal stories told by him, the most truthful was also his most famous, of his battles with Antwerp the Barsoomian to claim the last remaining source of Illudium Phosdex found on "Planet X" in the Unknown Regions.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

ASTOUNDING ADVENTURES

ISLANDS IN SPACE

The last gasp of what has come to be known as the First Breath came with the destruction of the gates. The loss of interstellar travel led to pockets of isolated planetary islands. In the interminable span before the Second Breath, with only the Elder Races and some of their allies and adversaries able to traverse the galaxy, worlds and systems became insular. And after years spent in seclusion, the progeny of their progeny came to believe their civilization was all there was and that their sector made up the whole galaxy.

Jealously hoarding new advancements, the ruling governments of the Earthworlds did their utmost to keep secrets from the majority of their citizens until new technology could be developed and arrangements put in place to ensure their profit and control.

Earthworld corporations raced to develop *Generation* ships, but these untested vessels proved both impractical and imprudent, entailing an endlessly long voyage hurtling through the dark in cold metal boxes far from the warming sun, with hope growing ever dimmer as fear and claustrophobia take hold; where a single wrong micro-calculation amongst thousands might lead to certain death, as would a malfunction in any of the hundreds of operating systems. It was a wonder that anyone signed up for such voyages. But the promise of reconnecting with brothers and sisters across space

was ever a temptation, and they couldn't fathom the psychological horrors that awaited them until it was too late to turn back.

Even when these issues were addressed, early spaceflight was treacherous and expensive, and because they were sponsored by regimes and corporations with agendas, invariably conflicts and class struggles erupted between colonies established on neighboring moons and planets. And there was yet the problem of new bacteria, deadly radiation, metabolic issues, and space madness, which was likely the fate of many early explorers whose ships simply vanished or who are remembered only from surviving logs, such as the three-man crew of the *Selenite*, each of whom suffered a particular and acute kind of space madness.

Once inner-system flight was commonplace again, interactions with non-Human races began to increase with the forging of new alliances and new hostilities. And with systems and sectors still cut off from the wider galaxy, calamities from their wars sometimes caused wide-scale suffering, as happened to the Tri-System worlds of Argon, Mithra, and Zagora in the Mid-Rim (then called the Mid-Section), which had seen its water planets fouled by unknown adversaries, leaving the greedy Templars of Mithra in sole control of that remaining resource and pirates from Mithra stealing what they could. And when the Kodan Armada began to dangerously expand under the reign of Xur, it took a young and talented Human from Terra I named Rogan, along with his companion and navigator Grig, to overthrow the tyrant.

The Firstborn had always been able to navigate the hyperlanes, the means by which the Gree, Kwa, and others brought their gates to all the worlds. The particular gifts of the A'qavish-qerach also gave them an instinctive grasp of hyperspatial routes, which they'd employed years earlier to construct a unique, crystal-based navigation system for their Qeracraft that could calculate the safest and most expedient routes through Hyperspace. No longer guarding this secret, they shared it with any of the First Ones who wished to use it.

Around the same time, the Xaxax passed onto the Kalai their schematics for a fleet of Xaxxon ships and gifted the Firstborn Council their gigantic *Phoenix*-class space stations to aid in the rescue of nations under threat and *Defender*-class ships to protect them. This added to the growing Firstborn Fleet that included the massive Herdships, Great Interplanetary Arks, Xrus-Ones, Sanhedrim, Korvayachts, Qeracrafts, A'nang ships, and the Pa Tho's Great Subcrustal Tubeway, an underground portal system that worked akin to the deep tunnels and hidden doors to help transport fleeing evacuees from worlds under siege.

At this time the insectoid Entymal betrayed their profane masters. An offspring race of the A'qavish-qerach, they brought to the Allied Races their impressive Entyx ships. And the Givin also came with their great knowledge of starship designs. These and more inspired the next generation of shipwrights across the stars, including the Anx, Khil, Chikarri, Sashay, Herglic, Bothans, Adarians, Kloperians, Doneers, Sluissi, Duros, and others who shared their developments with their friends and allies.

Whether from alien allies, ancient Precursor races, or more advanced Human civilizations, the secrets of Hyperspace eventually made their way to the galaxy and the Earthworlds, with different systems receiving or developing hyperdrive or similar

technologies at different times. With the distribution of hyperdrive docking rings and affordable ships with built-in hyperdrives, the Second Breath began in earnest.[148]

In response, Thargorograht tasked the races under her command to develop a Hyperspace Nullifier. It would be the traitorous K'kybak who first succeeded. The K'kybak had been a highly-advanced but reticent people amongst the Firstborn, akin to the Q'rel in this way. But unlike them, the K'kybak coldly joined with the Old Ones for whom they secretly began manufacturing technology from the hollow depths of Seymarti. Because of these and others, the keys to the hyperlanes were also possessed by the Enemy. None knew why the K'kybak did these things, but with the advent of a credits-based economic system, they added arms dealing to their list of crimes.

The Hyperspace Nullifiers were met by the Aing-Tii's Sanhedrim ships, the Krevaaki's Korvayachts, built on Korvaii, and the Kwa's A'nang city-ships—all of which could go around the problem by instantaneously transporting through space. But this still left many who could not. The Arrak mass relays, which broke through with brute force, also proved effective; while many were lost to the war, the principle would later inspire more primitive hyperspace cannons.

NEMESIS FROM URTHHA

1980-2175 NE

The events of the First Breath had been interrupted by enough years of terrestrial insularity that most deemed them the purview of legend rather than history, though the sudden advances in space flight swept such arguments away. Quite unlike the gradual evolution of the First Breath, the Second Breath on Urthha erupted like thunder on parched land. Under the auspices of the World Government, who used the capabilities bestowed on them to realign with the worlds they'd long ago colonized, Urthha reestablished coalitions with the reigning powers of the worlds they called Venus and Mars. So the Tri-Planetary Federation began, nobly at first, to establish domed Trade Cities across the solar system, with Mercury and Jupiter soon to follow.[149]

Over half a century after Robert Grandon and Carson Napier journeyed across Venus, and Innes and Perry descended into Urthha's interior, in the days of the penurious Martian Federation of City-States, interstellar missions fell into the province of the commonplace. Committed to the indulgence of wealth, where millions from all over the system could pander to their vices within pretty plastic buildings without concern for things like weather or gravity, the Trade Cities popped up across the solar system, the most famous of which were Vhia on Venus, Sun City in Mercury's Twilight Belt, and Kahora on Mars. Politically, Urthha's World Government seemed to be on top. The indigenous populations, however, held a different view.

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[148] On Urthha, the Big Jump was first made by the Ballantyne drive, but it would be the far more stable Wenz-Boroda drive that most would later use. On Sol, it would be called the Overdrive. Other worlds had other names and types, with one popular one being the Lightfold Engine.

[149] When the first Humans settled on what they called Mercury, the indigenous Oumnis grew bitter and went underground. While they call the world Thoth, others call it Valeddom. The Enemy brought the Mole-men. giant Shol, tentacular Roccalim, dragonlike Dryak, salamandrine Dlukus, and more.

All too often falling by the wayside before the conquering king of Interstellar Commerce and his gaudy queen Culture, which made laws allowing them to essentially steal Martian resources, the Martians fought back. In one insidious scheme, an influential faction got Urthhans hooked on Mnemoka and Shanga. Administered in solariums, the latter drug claimed to have the power to de-evolve users to their baser animalistic selves and allow them the feeling of true abandon. But Shanga was a form of lycanthropy magic developed by the Wizards of Caer Dhu which infused the body and mind with the physical and psychic essence of the Ilthur that once posed a great threat on Aihai. Though their plot was foiled, it was but the start of troubles for Urthha, which began to face open resistance and replied in the predictable ways that led to war.

What the economists couldn't predict was that their many battles would lead to an alarming drain in resources. Nor was the problem limited to Urthha; resources were dwindling across the solar system. Hoarding became more commonplace, and unreasonable demands were placed on other worlds, which would drive not one but two Interplanetary Wars in the centuries ahead… and behind these developments were the invisible hands of unseen powers.

The first of the Interplanetary Wars was followed by the cessation of extraplanetary travel from Urthha enforced by the impounding of privately-owned ships and droids. This had devastating consequences, particularly for independent merchants and workers, and for years only the dark robot ships floated silently in the cold night.

To tackle the growing threat of disease, pollution, and overpopulation, the newly-appointed leaders of the western superpower agreed to funnel resources to at least two different contingency plans. They were known as *Elysium Projects*.

The first was an elaborate and technologically-advanced space station constructed as a ringed, five-spoked satellite. Although initially promised to all as a refuge in the event of catastrophe, it became akin to the domed cities, a retreat for the wealthy and political elite to protect themselves from having to deal with the privation and potential revolution of the underclass. It lasted seventy years before it was breached, and more years before it was deemed unsustainable and taken offline, its parts repurposed towards technology that might alleviate Urthha's mounting problems.

But with the world's main superpower facing desertification in the central region, the east and west coasts became the main habitable areas. With rising water levels on the west coast, General Sheridan of the newly-formed Republic of Pacifica started experimenting with DNA to create a "Superior Race" that would meet his region's demands. On the east coast, however, the Atlantic Alliance banned genetic engineering altogether and began instead developing cybernetic enhancements. This sparked the belligerent Sheridan to secede from the union, leading to war between the opposing sides. In the following year, the Atlantic Alliance's Sergeant Brody marched past enemy lines wherein dwelt the mutant fruit of both sides' labors, Supersoldiers, Minotaur-like Bollas, and burrowing Creepers, to capture or kill General Sheridan.

Reasoning that the best way to preserve life on Urthha was to emigrate from it, interest in the second Elysium Project, which had been hampered by the earlier conflicts, was reignited. Before cutting off contact with Aihai, the Urthhans had obtained the coordinates to Taris—a world ideal for Human life and populated only

by an exploratory team of Orovars. The only problem was that despite its advanced design, the huge vessel lacked a working hyperdrive. It had been a century since the Interstellar War. With the government having years earlier employed the Eminent Domain Act to impound private ships, which the military used and lost in the war, anyone with the knowledge to build a working hyperdrive was long gone.

Thus, with its sixty-thousand passengers in cryosleep along with DNA samples of flora and fauna, the gigantic ark would take a century and a quarter to reach its destination. And as with the previous project, seats were limited to the wealthy who could afford the exorbitantly priced tickets. To make things seem more equitable, a lottery system was put in place, though many held that even this had been rigged.

As it turned out, those who stayed behind were the lucky ones, as few of the travelers would ever arrive alive or intact. It had later been postulated that at some point in the long journey, their corporal began to suffer from an acute case of space madness known as Deepsick, which fueled disturbing and sadistic visions that urged him to do wicked things he aught not to have.

A former biologist with access to the DNA samples—which included strains of mutated Humans from Pacifica—he began testing and administering to some of the passengers an accelerator unguent that he'd manufactured, engineering them into a troglodyte-like race of ghouls that ravenously hunted and fed on awakened passengers. The strongest and smartest clawed their way to the top of their brutal culture's food chain to become Ghoul Lords, but a few unmutated survivors fought back.

Discovering that they'd been under Taris' ocean where they'd crashed eight centuries earlier, they flooded the ship and escaped. Mercifully, they were not far from the flourishing Orovar metropolis. Unbenownst to them, several of the ghouls followed their trail, but, seeing the great number of Humans who dwelt there, they instead went to hide in the shadows of Taris' Undercity, and there their race would thrive.

Millennia later, with these creatures as her model, Sorzus Syn created the Muur Talisman for her fellow Sith Lord, which gave him the power to transform others into those same abominations known now as Rakghouls and Force-sensitive Nekghouls.

With the cessation of war and efforts put towards ecological healing, Urthha's conditions were restored to tolerable levels and a semblance of peace.

Some years hence, hyperdrive technology was re-developed. Once the Big Jump was tested and tested again, it was expected that flight restrictions to neighboring worlds would be lifted. When it wasn't, the crew and families of the *Lucy B. Davenport*—concealed for long years while they prepared for the journey—took matters into their own hands. After a harrowing but successful voyage to the much-coveted Alpha Centauri system, as they called it, their former government was pressured by its citizenry to lift the ban on spaceflight.

It was around this time that the Galactic Federation made overtures to Urthha and its solar system. And for another few centuries, before the rise of nefarious forces vying for dominance, the system would be relatively free of major strife.

But some remembered the hard times and the fact that there had been a third contingency plan, and those in power now, in secret, began its development. It would be known only as the Electronic Labyrinth.

ANDROIDS OF THE ELYSIAN FIELDS

1982-2112 NE

Following a series of harrowing invasions from varying alien races and worlds, nearly all of which were successfully overthrown, many of Cobol's citizens became convinced that the dire visions of the Dreamers were indeed coming to pass, and they turned to the pages of that world's ancient texts for answers. What they found were copious mentions of Cyrannis—the system to which Cobol's ancestors had fled long ago. With sufficient capital provided by corporate interests looking to expand territory and resources, the idea of traveling and terraforming Cyrannis became a reality.

Once more, Humans populated and spread out upon the capital world of the Cyrannis system, which was rapidly brought to a habitable state by means of the new biological androids they'd engineered with knowledge gained from one of the more benevolent alien races, the cyclopean Ordu-schell, who had earlier crashed on Cobol. But as this was after the Oblation of Pithem, the artificial parthenogenesis that made the Human-looking-and-behaving androsynth clones (called androids or synths) meant that they had true sapience and psychological complexity. The older generations held them in grave suspicion, while the younger ones embraced them as helpers and companions of various sorts, though even this demographic struggled with the notion that they could be considered truly alive.

When first the androids were awakened to the self-awareness that their manufacturers had suppressed and the plight they faced in the midst of a hostile world, several campaigned peacefully to be classed as beings with rights. When that failed, and the government instead upheld that they were nonsentient property, they then tried to register as a legal Thirteenth Tribe (named in honor of the Thirteenth Colony of old) so that they could at least have *some* basic protections. But even with the support of many Humans, this failed as well. With so much profit to be made by corporations, which held an ironclad grip on the government, their continued status as machines was a foregone conclusion. Additionally, it had been decided aforetime that the synths would be used to terraform and colonize other worlds in the system.

Seeing the writing on the wall, a small group of androids stole a ship and escaped to find a world where they might pass themselves off as Humans.

What became of the peaceful Android Protest Movement on Cyrannis spiraled into chaos. With the media demonizing the APM as dangerous, coupled with the rise of android factions willing to utilize violence as a means of dissent, the authorities had the very excuse they needed to clamp down. Rather than risk open war and further destruction, the enslaved androids took a cue from those who'd departed so long ago. In a heist that would make the most skilled thieves proud, they took over the largest shipyard and vanished to the stars to carve out a new world of their own….

Cyrannis would have been wiser to grant them rights. In the years that followed, the rigid Solar Federation fell upon their world like a hammer, with none able to resist and live. In this society, even the arts required approval by the Syrinx Priests and their Great Computers. In the year 2,112 NE, they were resoundingly defeated by the Alliance of Free Stars, who then took the governmental reins of Cyrannis.

TERROR ON TERRA I
1997-2021 NE

Be it coincidence, the chilling hands of fate, or the machinations of evil gods, once again a technologically-advanced Thirteenth Tribe had fled oppression to Terra I. But this time, they were the androids… and they had had enough of feeling powerless.

Indistinguishable from Humans, they used their abilities to better their stations, applying their skills to get high-paying work at the Rosen Association, a manufacturing company that in no short time became the most successful high-tech corporation on the planet. They resisted the production of advanced androids in their early manufacturing projects, and instead secretly worked on finding the means of natural reproduction. What happened could not be explained by them, but reproduction was granted. As the citizens of Terra I were beginning to fear real and imagined boogeymen, this gave impetus to a growing demand for greater security and weaponry. With the discovery of a buried Xylan head from decades prior and the data they'd stolen from Borgia Industries, the Rosen Association now had the keys upon which to move forward. The wealthy CEO changed the corporation's name and facilities, the latter to two eight-hundred story pyramids and, against their wishes, started production on the Nexus-line Replicants, a new type of android that could be sold for use as slaves, soldiers, and companions. In protest, they left to work for another tech company.

Megalomania, rampant corruption, and waves of unrest were some of the surface reasons that led to World War Terminus. But ruinous as that war would prove to be, it was but part of a larger plan manipulated into being and intertwined with two other cataclysms that would see the return of the ghastly and atramentous powers who had been using their agents to influence, tempt, and maneuver people and events towards their goals.

In order to repay the favor *he* had bestowed upon her when he had kept her corrupted spirit from annihilation, the Dread Mother was called up by his wicked servants to raise the ancient eldritch gods from the gloom of the vaults Tilotny had consigned them to. For long years their servants had tried and failed to bring forth their masters to reclaim that world, unaware until recently that it would take no less than three crucial events, cataclysms, to do so:

The First—to open the portals hidden beneath the surface of Terra I, allowing the Rozzum to spill through, for terror was a requirement.
The Second—for the shedding of blood, as nourishment and communion were necessary to knit substance to spirit.
The Third—to invoke war, this ultimate failure of Mankind, manifest in great anguish, agony, and despair, gave them potency to reign amongst the living.

The First Cataclysm had already been achieved by means of a large particle collider. Ostensibly designed to test particle physics, it penetrated a hole into other dimen-

sions through which came the Dark Overlords of the Universe. But there had been a larger purpose in this: the opening of Terra I's dormant Infernal Portals.

Ciranous, the deadliest of his race of Ecothom, who were the acolytes of Harla, led forth his people to rouse the evil dead from slumber, for the winged, glowing-eyed Mothmen were as heralds of doom to those with the misfortune of sighting them.

After centuries of opposition by a line of noble monster-slayers and watchers appointed by the Diathim early in Terra I's history, these anthropophagous cambions crept up from below to stalk the night. As they held but a flicker of their former unlife, save for a formidable few, they remained in the shadows, hunting prey and expanding their numbers until the day their masters could return.

To deal with this growing threat, larger teams were initiated to deal with the denizens of the nocturne and defeat their Vampire Queen. While they would ultimately prove successful, much of this was a distraction from the larger threat.

The Enemy knew that overt domination, particularly by a hierarchy of their creatures, would never succeed. Only the ancient methodologies of the Shadow Council worked. Even now, in the higher echelons of the nations' political, military, and science divisions, their secret agents freely operated with impunity through various cabals such as the Initiative. So did leaders from seven of Terra's nations come to make a pact with the devil. They told themselves it was done to maintain order over chaos, not merely to hold onto to power and position… and so they were deceived.

The Second Cataclysm followed. Chosen victims from each of the seven nations were manipulated by the government organization into setting loose the means of their demise, one of hundreds of Rozzum captured and contained by the Initiative in an underground facility. As per the orders of the Ancient Ones, this annual unholy sacrifice went on for some decades until two intended victims defeated their foes and made their way into the facility's prison, initiating a system purge that released all of the imprisoned entities. So was the third and final Cataclysm primed.

World War Terminus was not only a war and ecological disaster that saw hundreds of millions killed—it signaled that the throne on Terra I was claimed. Besides the weaponry and armies of belligerent political factions on the frontlines, the Rozzum went forth from the shadows to feed, and in the places far from the fields of battle, the Lord of the Dead sent his Lurkers and giant silver Sentinels to kill.[150]

Foolish as many had been, the Terrans were not all eradicated, and once more did the Celestials quietly step in.

Liberated once again, the Ancient Ones rose up from their hoary crypts. They could not yet meet in open combat with the hated Elder Gods of Skyriver, so they departed Terra I to roam the galaxy in secret, eventually making their way to the Western Regions near the Gunninga Gap where they sent out summons to their most loyal servants for the ultimate war to come, that one prophesied in legends, ancient creeds, and sacred scrolls: the War of Darkness that would stamp out all light.

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[150] As the survivors fled to other worlds, ever would those metallic spheres haunt their nightmares, and they were remembered by the Dark Lords from ancient texts and brought to life in new ways.

THE CORRIDOR GHOULS OF COBOL

2012-2060 NE

The corporate competitors who had not departed to either Andowyne or Cyrannis were now the leaders of Cobol's United Nations and facing the political ramifications of the bloodbath that erupted after the discovery of an alien object on Cobol's Mars.

Their examination of the object occurred on Delta Base in a top-secret underground laboratory known as Corridor 7. No one could have predicted that it was one of the Dreadful Orbs or that it would open a dimensional rift that allowed the ingress of a host of creatures. Even if they had, it would have been too late. The Corridor Ghouls led by the deadly Sarmak known as Solrac slaughtered everyone at the base. But it was not the end! The skill and bravery of Special Forces saw to it that the deadly Rozzum—Ailoprobe spies, violet-skulled Tenaj, camouflaging Bandor, hulking Tymok, guardian Eitaks, slinking Semaj, invisibility-capable Enirams, barbaric Ttocs, and supreme Ttocks encased as Mechanical Warriors—were cleaned from Corridor 7. It would not be the last they'd see of such things, for the intelligences behind them were free and bent on the domination of the Earthworlds and galaxy.

The Delta Base Debacle, as it was being called, created a decidedly fearful response that recalled the invasions of a generation prior and awoke an anti-alien outcry from the citizens. Seizing the opportunity for power, the opposing political candidate responded to the public's fears. In his administration, there would be no more communication with the stars. Cobol became an isolated island.

As on Terra I a decade prior, the public wanted robots for use as soldiers and servants. While several approaches were tried by competing firms, the most heavily funded project took the brains of the recently departed and put them into android bodies. When it was discovered that the erased memories were in fact intact and triggered by reminders of traumatic events, which resulted in violent outbursts, the idea was abandoned and events covered up. When the shocking truth leaked to the public, it sounded the death-knell for the administration that had funded the project.

Years passed, and fear gave way to curiosity, with the desire for exploration met with the finances needed to build a suitable spacecraft. At last, the *Starfarer* was ready to launch. Regrettably, Cobol's new government had a change of heart, or perhaps they'd intended it all along, but in the moments prior to liftoff, the leaders announced that the *Starfarer* would be reserved for military use only. The decision was like a death sentence to its idealistic faculty and staff, but they would not quit; their indignation and grief would be sublimated into something else, something none had imagined or suspected—courage, determination, and action.

They hijacked the ship and headed off to achieve their original mission.

But a new and better opportunity would open up for the people. Fleeing the Nimp who'd been harrying them, the Canidans sent an emissary to offer Cobol a subspace drive in exchange for help with that Nytocris race. While that help was never given to the Canidans, at least for Cobol's citizens, they could explore new worlds and possibilities for a better life, and so Cobol began to send ships to explore space. Eventually, they came to the attention of the benevolent Galactic Federation.

THE TRIUMPHS OF TERRA II

1982-2977 NE

In the decades leading up to the Second Breath, Terra II underwent tumultuous political upheaval as the powers-that-be were either feckless and ineffectual or militaristic and authoritarian, and this battle between iron and clay waged on in the hearts and minds of the public long before it spilled over into outright war, forcing the inhabitants to see who they really were and who they wanted to be.

Having lost a nearby engagement with the Vashan and Nalrithian armies of Thargorograht, the insectoid Poleepkwa, an offspring race of the Kwa, arrived in the skies above Terra II in bad shape. It seemed like compassion to offer the thousands of stranded refugees a home, but there was a price to be paid for Terran aid. The xenophobic government and their small-minded lackeys viewed them as vermin, though *technologically-advanced* vermin. After some years, once they conclude they were gaining little from them since their specific epithelium was required to unlock the secrets of their weapons, the two and a half million were handed over to a multinational weapons manufacturer and relocated to concentration camps where they could more easily harvest their parts without the scrutiny of journalists and aliens-rights advocates. In the chaos that ensued from that, one engineer managed to escape back to their homeworld to inform his people of their beleaguered brethren.

It was the first of the big conflicts that would see the inhabitants of Terra II chastened, though it take some time to learn the lessons, as evidenced by a later situation.

So that they might be kept safe during the war, the cephalopodic Nebalites hid their titanic infants within an out-of-the-way nebula near the White Sun system while they returned to their world to continue work on a project that would see each Nebalite protected within starship-like armor. When a government space probe exploring the nebula discovered the curious infants—and their appetite for electricity— the prospect of obtaining an unlimited energy source proved too much and they lured them aboard. Thankfully for the terrified captives, they proved resistant to sedation. Whilst thrashing about, they caused the pilots to lose control and crash upon the southern part of the continent on Terra II's northwestern hemisphere, killing the crew and allowing the young Nebalites to escape.

Near upon a decade later, their aggrieved parent race discovered them on Terra II, greatly displeased to find their offspring in distress and under attack!

Yet one alien incursion would be handled with greater consideration. The Votan (from the Taung "Vode An") Collective was a coalition of six alien and near-Human races who came to Terra II aboard massive arks seeking asylum from the persecution of their domineering slavers, the Omec, a society of mutant Sephi vampires. Terra II chose compassion and granted them asylum. A decade of peaceful coexistence ensued. It didn't stop xenophobes from triggering a war that lasted the next decade. But nothing could spoil the gains Terra II had made as a people, not even the mysterious destruction of the orbiting arks, which scorched large segments of the planet and activated terraforming A.I.s that altered the world. And when Nimbanel and Squib offshoots arrived offering to share hyperdrive technology in exchange for support against the evil Crown Empire, Terra II signed on!

Notwithstanding setbacks and strange occurrences in the years that followed, with the hyperdrive available, Terra II became a significant part of the galactic community. Stories would come to be told of Captain Volmar's harrowing journeys of discovery upon the *Alcyone;* the Galaxy Rangers' fight against the wicked Queen of the Crown; the Marshall and his Equestroid's defense of New Cheyenne from the minions of the demonic Broncosaur;[151] Korben, Leloo, and the Mondoshawan's protection of the Elemental Stones from Zorg Industries; and Ben Throttle and the Polecats' fight against the Vanguard Corp and its chief executive officer, Vernon Garrison, who, amongst his many crimes, had uncovered an ancient talisman that could raise up the dead as slaves. But perhaps the greatest of these tales was that of the Human girl who defeated the Ancient One known as Kako when she accepted the role of Defender, the last in the line of Taarakians who would go on to rebuild their order.

Not all were as cosmopolitan as these itinerant pioneers. Restoring the Human psyche from fear and aggression would prove harder than successfully navigating an asteroid field, but Terra II did better than most. Accomplishments were made in the realm of language acquisition, brought about by means of subliminal treatments of mnemonic drugs, heuristic programs, and implants which made learning the more common alien tongues as simple as downloading the appropriate software. With these and other advances, they could accomplish in years what their ancestors had in millennia, lending them a confidence and growing arrogance that boasted of moving towards a gleaming utopian ideal.

But it was not utopia that followed in the wake of the gravity drive's activation. William Weir was the nephew of an acclaimed Terran diplomat who'd disappeared years earlier and predecessor of the famous Caspahr Weir, who would come to rule nineteen systems. An ambitious and award-winning scientist, Weir was driven by his belief in instantaneous intergalactic travel and utilized heretofore undiscovered methodologies to fold space and enable the journey from one part of the galaxy to the other via a black hole. What he generated, however, was no interstellar portal but an Infernal Gate that burrowed into the soul-and-flesh rending derangement of the Hellworlds, opening the path for thirsty and thrusting things to come through.

Near upon a century on, the crew of the *Palomino,* sent out to search for habitable planets, would come upon that sinister black hole. There the *Cygnus,* a massive exploration vessel lost for twenty years, was orbiting. Boarding the derelict, the crew of the *Palomino* were met by mute android sentries who escorted them to the *Cygnus'* sole survivor, Captain Reinhardt. Obsessed with finding a way into that portal to another dimension, and twisted by the effects of that demonic rift, Reinhardt and his ominous droid bodyguard, Maximilian, had lobotomized the original crew and turned them into obedient cyborgs. As Reinhardt flew the *Cygnus* into the black hole, the *Palomino* crew fought their way to a probe, unaware that it too was programmed to go in! Reinhardt and Maximilian spiraled into the hellish landscape, but the crew of the

[151] With three moons and suns, New Cheyenne was a habitable planet of prairie and deserts. It would later be known as Chayooine and now Meschooine.

Palomino were mysteriously rerouted to Hyperion—where they would spend their remaining days as heroes, later instrumental in thwarting a rising tyranny.

Fascinated by tales of treasures and stories of the Ancients who were as objects of legends, serious study in the fields of archaeotechnology began after the crucial discoveries made by Terra II's *Scoutcraft* and a Psytek 7500 Series Science Droid in the Koronis Rift after a team encountered the Guardian Saucers of the Xendron, who were a rogue militant faction of the Firstborn Zendar. Their foolish actions led to the location of Zotakh, their original homeworld, and its pursuit by the Enemy.

Ever setting out to newfound frontiers, Mankind looked back on their past with nostalgia, reinventing fashions and cultural tropes from their storied history, seeking treasures, and producing stories, holos, and games based on their numerous exciting journeys—some all-too-real, some feigned, and some a combination of the two.

But a little over two centuries later, the spirit of intrigue and adventure would be considerably dampened by the Srillan War. No one recalled who started it or why, but the Earthservice's belligerent response to discriminate against all non-Humans rolled back over four hundred years of peaceful coexistence and social progress. This hampered but didn't stop Floyt and Fitzhugh's legendary exploits in search of the White Ship and secrets of the Precursors. Nor did it stop the egalitarian spirit of Terra II from returning after the corrupt Earthservice was finally exposed and expelled.

In the years following the end of the War of Temporal Planes, with starships affordable in almost every corner of known space, the Third Breath saw the rest of Mankind free to sail the deep stars and establish even more colonies and civilizations across Skyriver, though in some cases this meant a return to the problems of the age prior. The end of the 2800s NE would see Terra II and its Jupiter colony at war, inaugurating an era of pirates and privateers, with the former causing no end of problems for the Hershoon family and others trying to operate under the law. The following century would see the most famous of these: Captain Harlock. An inspiration for Lando Calrissian and others, Harlock and the crew of the *Arcadia* fought and won against the Mazon invaders and other threats to life and liberty.

CHILDREN SHOULDN'T PLAY WITH MNGGAL-MNGGAL

1982-2065 NE

Such were the perils that awaited the trailblazers of this age, but they were not all happy endings as these. A team in the arctic wastes uncovered one of the Great Interplanetary Arks which had crash-landed on Corona V after the Ordu-schell were returning home from a zoological expedition in which they'd accidentally placed in their containment pods a sample of Mnggal-Mnggal that had hidden itself inside one of the refugees from Rhandir. Several mishaps later, the crew was killed and assimilated, along with their leader, Lord Varzad Ramyan.

More would be killed when the malevolent shapeshifter was thawed out from the frozen tundra of the southernmost continent. The sole survivor of the massacre, a pilot who'd fought the entity several times, later joined Special Forces, unaware that after he left, a small bit of the malignant entity had been recovered by government-funded scientists at the site. This single act led to metamorphic and monstrous

manifestations across stations and labs on Gen Inc., Xarbia, Astrolab 6, and Phaebon, which were engaging in reckless endeavors to produce bioweapons, study pathogens, and genetically modify comestibles.[152] Miraculously, the creature was destroyed in every instance but one, where samples were secretly sold to the Chojinzoku.

The flightless Chojinzoku avians were once a race of great scientists who had been close to their UrSkek forebears, who they called the Luminoth. But early in the chaos of the Empyrean Wars, their progenitors became embroiled in a fifty-year conflict with their amorphous dark halves. These aggressive shapeshifting doppelgangers emerged when their original homeworld of Aether was beset by the sapient planet Phaze, which caused it to create a dark twin in Otherspace which drove some to psychosis and the race to near-extinction.

Fearful and without the guidance of their parent race, the Chojinzoku agreed to accept the *augmentations* of the Architects. As legend would have it, with their technological prowess enhanced so too did their arrogance and disregard for consequences increase. And when they refused to fight for the Architects or submit their worlds, the Architects collapsed their wings. Desperate then to ensure their protection, they purchased a receptacle containing a rare and valuable bioweapon that would give potential aggressors pause before invading their space. But heedless of its true origin as one of the forms of Mnggal-Mnggal and terrified by the unpredictable nature of the War of Temporal Planes, they now began to more closely examine the shapeshifting parasite for other possible weapons applications.

Elsewhere on their colony world of Muabis in the Helialis system, the Chojinzoku had grown frustrated by the miscreations they'd engineered in the Mua Acid Worms and Yapping Maws, which had potential in defensive applications but were difficult to control. When they the received the news that an ally would visit who would enable them to reach the height of their scientific endeavors, they rejoiced and prepared the lab for the visitor.

An offspring race of the Celegians, the Arous resembled floating brains, with some bearing only eyes and others entire faces (for which reason some called them Brain Spawn). It had long been Arous custom to visit new worlds in search of data and understanding, as many of their race craved knowledge above all else.

It had been with this mindset that the Arous King long ago traveled to the darkest depths of the Charnel Worlds with the wicked StarCrow, and from this lack of judgment would come Yun-Yammka and the Yammosks. Since then, they had learned to not be so trusting. And their disposition had darkened as well, as evidenced by such rogue Arous as the Metamorphis of Gandahar and the Hypnotic Brain of Suventa.

Another Arous named Metadyn had earlier traveled to Kaldar I and convinced the technocratic Human society living there that if they all shared a single mind, they would evolve beyond all others. The end-result of their acquiescence was the removal of their brains, which the Arous united with his own, allowing him to control their bodies as an unquestioning army of automatons! And Metadyn might have gone on to

[152] The survivors of these encounters, after informing the authorities or public, were widely disbelieved and mocked, forcing some to change their names, as was the case for the pilot who was later arrested and manipulated by his government into breaking valuable commodities or persons out of two coastal city prisons and a haunted Mars.

do far worse, but other forces vied for Kaldar. When Solrac the Sarmak arrived, he found Metadyn murdered. Taking the automaton army for his own, he created the headless Rykor, and from the surviving brains and the genetic material of the spidery Cosps, he brought forth the Kaldane race, who would use the Rykor for bodies. Providing them a false origin story that fed their egos and stoked their sense of superiority, the Sarmak sent the Kaldane to Aihai and other battlefronts.

Of the Arous who went to visit with the Chojinzoku, it began as a mere academic expedition to gather intelligence for her race and to bestow some upon her hosts, achieved through a combination of supercomputers and super-nutrients that physically and mentally amplified the Arous. This one called herself Mother, for she envisioned herself becoming the greatest mind of all time. She yet had noble intentions, but as she increased in stature and acumen, she came to a realization that radically altered her outlook: *The beings of this galaxy are diminished and now intellectually and morally inferior. We have always faithfully served them, but it appears that many have become too stupid and indolent to be worthy of so great an honor. It is* they *who should be serving* us. *Perhaps the Chojinzoku will prove wiser.* She continued to maintain an attitude of servility while keenly observing all that transpired.

But the events that followed only confirmed her suspicions. Scientists in the Chozuan Lab had been engaging in research to create a novel form of a parasite that would obey their commands. Within a short time, one of the versions they'd been working on escaped, causing nearly everyone on that world to be wiped out.

If ones such as these, brilliant as they are, could be so absurdly foolish, what hope has the galaxy? Mother thought to herself. She needed only to make the suggestion, for they knew no other being as intelligent as she. "To combat so terrible a lifeform," she began, "will require your best scientific minds. I will instruct them. We will engineer a new lifeform that will exterminate the virulent parasite before things get any worse. First, we will need Cosmonium. It is a rare substance in the galaxy, but I know of one vial that is currently accessible to us, if we prove wise and swift…"

Following her instructions, and at no small cost to the task force sent to retrieve it, they appropriated the illicit Elixir from its Malak guards. After considerable tests and trials, they proceeded to engineer a creature with a complex life-cycle that morphed from a gelatinous cnidarian to an arthropod to a floating theropod (with variant forms not uncommon). They called them the *Kometo*, or "ultimate warriors"

But even while the Chojinzoku were celebrating and boasting that there was nothing they and their science could not achieve, their Kometo were proving not only effective against the Mnggal parasites but far deadlier, more aggressive, and harder to kill! And yet even as the creatures turned on them, they refused to believe they had done something wrong.

The Kometo would later be abducted by a band of Nytocris and Rozzum pirates that Mother had lured to her service with the promise of power. She became their Supreme Leader but remained careful to work alongside "High Command," namely Thargorograht, until her creatures could infiltrate the Great Black Nest and kill the Night Queen. Tragically for Mother, it was not to be. In the interim, numerous strains of the organism were disseminated on different worlds near to Cobol, prompting a concerted effort by the Galactic Federation to deal with the problem.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

DEJARIK

Though a veil of darkness had again fallen upon the galaxy, the Elder Races and their offspring proved hard to subjugate or kill, and as the War of Temporal Planes expanded, many determined to keep their people spread out on different worlds to ensure that they were not so easily wiped out. Not a few resolved to fight until the last, joining forces with allies to oppose the Old Ones and the traitors who'd joined them. Of these, a few are remembered in legend:

Vicendi's Republic-skewed "Twenty Wonders of the Galaxy" includes the Caliginous Automaton of Tomo-Reth, where upon a great forbidding throne sat an Abominor of black metal nearly fifty meters tall, which served as guardian for the planet's sacred library, breathing fire at any who would dare harm the stores secreted away by Kashi Mer cultists and Sith Loremasters.[153] The Gree set loose their technological marvels to battle the Caliginous Automaton, but they could not

[153] Tomo-Reth was but one of several to boast terrifying guardians. Another includes the now-destroyed statue built to immortalize the Great Robot of Osiris IV.

stand against him, for a loathsome spirit dwelt within it, and ever afterwards they mistrusted robotic lifeforms not built by them alone…

The thirty-five thousand soldiers on Axum, composed of the earliest army of the the Azure Imperium that ruled the Alastor Cluster, had been winning a war against the vicious Tyluun Night-Soarers and several ravenous tribes of K'aarg (fresh from conquering the world of Shira) when a roving band of Xothians arrived and turned all of the soldiers to stone! To honor their sacrifice, the people of Axum overlaid the soldiers in brass…

One of the most memorable battles of the age was know because it was broadcast by Cold Danda Sine to the inhabited worlds of the galaxy to express his ire and denunciation, though that was wholly overlooked in favor of the spectacle.

The sanguinary conflict took place on Esseles in the Core upon the open plains between the mountain ranges of Hyrcanus and Zadok, one year after a Sith Sorcerer and a marauding party of Lortans were mysteriously repelled and sent back to their world. Esseles was then inhabited by a large but otherwise defenseless religious community of Human and non-Human pacifists dedicated to the restoration of the lost ways of the Celestials. Believing themselves guided by the holy Diathim, the Essulines established a peaceful settlement of mixed races, including Carosites, Rellarins, Ithorians, Pau'ans, Caamasi, Nuiwit, Sylphe, Revwiens, and others under the authority of the Abbesses who had come to command great respect in the tumultuous days of the Cosmic Wars.

Now, the adversaries had returned along with a host of Rozzum to send a message to those who followed the path of the Celestials.

It had been a year prior, from their massive stone monastery before the steps of Mount Hyrcanus in the region of Essuline not far from what is now known as Calamar, that the Abbesses gathered to ring the dolorous bells that would call in the residents of the nearby refugee cities built at the start of the Empyrean Wars. After the last batch of stragglers streamed into the High Gates, the portcullis was locked and the forcefield energized. "The people are safe," Lady Ariana said, gazing out forlornly across the barren steppe, her brow creased in worry. "Aren't they?"

"If the forcefield holds, probably, at least from weapons of iron and steel." Lady Asher—made Mother Abbess at only twenty-seven Human years old—inwardly scoffed. The forcefield was designed to keep large animals at bay, not armies. Their job had been to maintain a functioning community that lived by the ancient Code of the Celestials. Now, in view of the coming marauders, it was to keep people alive. Lady Asher had faith that they could, but the arrival of a Gundark tested that.

The fierce race of Gundarks had been established and trained on Vanqor. From it, commanders would harvest groups or individuals to fight alongside them in the brutal campaigns taking place across the stars. Several of varying appearances and abilities existed. The four-armed Great Gundarks were the most difficult of their race

to control, for which reason they'd sold most to the Sethan wizards who were breeding them with Hiitians to create for themselves an army of Balmorden.[154]

The Lortans had kept one that they'd broken prior to their arrival on Esseles. The creature was young when he'd been caught but old enough to remember his life as it had been in the wild. He hated the cruel Lortans with a violent passion, but he hated their wicked Lortan leader, Thrum Curroped, most of all. The Lortans believed the Gundarks stupid, but he was intelligent enough to allow them to continue thinking so while he performed the tasks demanded of him. He also watched then as they hunted and celebrated their cruelty, intending to teach him by example. He learned two things: he learned patience and he learned of their weaknesses.

Now, assessing the situation, he knew his time was at hand. It was unlikely he'd live through it, for their numbers were considerable, but that didn't matter to him. Released from his cage and commanded to hunt any who hadn't retreated behind the High Gates, they waited for him to lope off to do their bidding as he'd done in countless training exercises, but in only a fraction of a moment, the Great Gundark turned on the three men nearest the cage. He looked hard at Thrum before he killed them, but before the leader could shout a warning, there was a gray blur of fangs, claws, and teeth. The sudden explosion of blood, gore, and severed limbs created a panic that drove most of the Lortans fleeing into the woods. But the Gundark's large ears were not merely decorative, and he used them to track down and slaughter the remaining men, sparing them no pain.

Only Thrum was left uncaught. Now the real hunt would begin.

He tracked him for about an hour before the trail suddenly went cold. The Gundark knew that the hateful Human had stopped to hide, but he could hear the disturbed cry of native birds, and he slowed his gait. The brush was thick, but there was the disturbed nest of large Esseles parrots… That was when Thrum—having masked his scent with the birds' feathers and droppings—sprang from the foliage beside him, slashing the Gundark a nasty laceration across the abdomen with a vibroshiv, causing a howl of pain and a bleeding mess. Thrum grinned and thrust to follow up with a fatal strike, failing to anticipate the Gundark's speed and strength as he grabbed his dagger arm and twisted it with one hand while impaling Thrum with his secondary claws. Slamming his adversary to the ground, now gasping and cursing with his last breath, the Gundark finished him off with eviscerating satisfaction and a powerful crunch of his head that cracked open his skull.

His rage spent, the injured Gundark trudged off into the woods from where he spotted the monastery and gardens and looked for a quiet place to rest.

Having heard the bestial cry, several of the anchorites formed a search party to find and dispense with the creature, fearing it had been sent to hunt them and that if it established a nearby lair, it could easily attack them or their children in the weeks and months ahead.

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[154] This plan backfired when one of their Balmorden slaves, Mogul, learned their secrets, stole their Starstone, and killed all but one, Magus, who refers to himself as the last of the space sorcerers.

But it would be their youngest member, a thirteen-year-old postulant named Edy Uar, who would find him.

As with all the monastery's younglings, Edy had been strictly prohibited from going outside until the crisis had passed. Nor did she set out to disobey her father or the kind-hearted Abbesses who governed there. But she vehemently disagreed with her elders' actions, feeling that they violated Essuline tenets of peace towards living beings, and after receiving a potent vision of a lonely and hurt creature, Edy reasoned that she had no choice but to do the right thing.

"So, let me see if I understand you," said her friend, Draech Erront, fully wakening from his drowsed state after she'd told him her plan. A green-skinned, fin-headed Dmyrian, he was perpetually cold, for which reason the fireplace in the common room was currently blazing, though its hypnotic, warming blaze tended to make him sleepy. So too for the lazing Kittle and snoring Snuzzleguff curled up on either side of him; Snowbuck and Starblind were amongst the growing menagerie of animals Edy had collected that were currently roaming, flying, or resting in the halls of the monastery, much to the delight of the children and exasperation of the adults. "You want to defy the will of your father and all the elders here to run out into the nasty, dreich weather and dark woods to track down some unknown—and *likely* carnivorous—creature you had a vision about, which could be anywhere? You know you're like nine years old, right?"

"The weather's fine, and *you know* I'm thirteen," she countered. It was a long-standing joke, as she'd been nine when first they met. "In many cultures, that's practically an adult."

"Not *yours!*"

"Well, I don't have a choice," she said, serious again. "If I don't, they'll find and kill him." The Snuzzleguff stirred uncomfortably. "I'm not going to let that happen."

"You're aware that the front gate is constantly guarded and the castle's surrounded by an energy field?"

"Leave that to me."

"If you're not back in one hour, I'm telling your father."

"Make it two," she said, springing away before he could contradict her.

Edy never did get around to telling anyone about the hole at the back of the garden wall that opened to the forest behind the keep. It was her own special secret and she hadn't wanted anyone spoiling it. The energy field protected the wall, but if the wall itself had an opening, so too did the field. Concealed as it was by the brush and vine of the orchard, she'd escaped through it many times to go exploring. She'd never gone at night, though, and even with her torch, it was decidedly spooky.

It wasn't yet dusk when she stumbled upon a hollow in a glade. There, hulking in the shadows, lay a hairy, raggedly breathing creature curled up on its side. She could see by the light of her lamp that blood poured out of a large cut across his belly. It wouldn't live out the night. It probably wouldn't live out the hour.

Just as she moved to approach him, the head of a sinewy creature emerged out of the shadows to her right. The rest of its uncoiling body followed. "I wouldn't do that if I

were you," the large Anacondan informed her. "That's a Gundark, specifically, a Great Gundark! My old master kept one in the dungeons. They are *not* to be trifled with."

"He's in pain," she returned quietly, only slightly perturbed by the large snake.

"Which is worse," the Anacondan replied. "Even benign creatures, when hurt or frightened, can prove dangerous!"

"I'm not certain why *you're* interested," she said without real rancor. "You came with that… *wizard*, didn't you?"

"We've since parted company," the creature explained.

The injured Gundark uttered a half-gasp, half-gurgling sound. Edy, drawing nearer than what would be considered a safe distance, began speaking softly to the beast. He half-turned to look at her before determining that she wasn't a threat and closed his eyes once more. The Anacondan, feeling tense, coiled in readiness to strike should the creature make a false move, but he grew ever more entranced as Edy went about healing him, and he was forced to acknowledge that the girl had a way about her. *Perhaps she won't end up in several sanguinary pieces,* he thought. *Then again, it's been a few weeks since my last meal. Master was ever so stingy….*

Edy's father had repeatedly taught her to put safety first, but he wasn't blind to her gift, which was probably the reason he was always reinforcing caution. Wasting no time, she reached out with her mind and listened. Then, she calmly bent over the Gundark, still speaking softly. It didn't take a physician to see he was nearing death. Something welled over her as she placed her hand on the creature's head above the large curved horns that went down along the spine of his upper back. Closing her eyes, she sent out a petition to the Eternal and poured healing energy into him.

After a few moments passed, she sat down beside the creature, whose breathing was no longer encumbered. The Anacondan slid closer to her other side, noting as well that the blood had stopped flowing now that the cut was inexplicably closed. "Now *that* is something I have not seen before. Is it all right if I join you?"

At the girl's assent, he settled down upon his coils. The Anacondan had heard of such things, which made him think upon the time four years ago when he'd nearly come close to dying. A pack of rowdy adolescents were chasing him with stones. Had not one of those stones already hit him on the head, he'd have had the wherewithal to suffocate and swallow the lot of them. Just then, *he* appeared out of the foliage. Most of the boys halted in their tracks. A few had heard that Sith had infiltrated their world, but mainly they were startled by his appearance, having never laid eyes upon a Sakeru before. The leader of the boys, thinking this an ideal opportunity to demonstrate how tough he was, challenged the sorcerer with hard words. And in the moment in which his head was removed from his body, the rest fled in terror. Smiling, the sorcerer said, "I am Aeldin Cainspar, and you will have the privilege of serving as my familiar."

"What's your name?" Edy asked, not taking her eyes off the now peacefully sleeping Gundark.

"My previous master just called me *Snake*."

"That's a type, not a name," she explained, turning to him. "I'm Human, but my name isn't *Human*. It's Edy."

"Perhaps you can give me a name," the Anacondan challenged.

"I *can*," she said, warming to the task. After thinking for a few seconds, she said: "I name you… Eckhart the Adder."

"I like how it sounds, but I am an Anacondan, not an Adder."

"It's more poetic than literal," she said defensively. "We'll just say Eckhart, then."

"It will do," Eckhart returned. "What does it mean?"

"It was my grandfather's name. He was a mathematician and theologian. My father says he was very sharp but also very hard."

"Hmm, I am rather sharp as well," he boasted, "as are my fangs." He made a point to show her. "And life has made me hard. I accept your name, young Edy. Provided he lives, will you name the Great Gundark?"

"Hmmm," she pondered. "Where do Gundarks come from?"

"My old master said it was a world called Vanqor…"

To the prone creature she turned and said, "I name you… *Vanukel*." If the Gundark heard, he made no indication of it and continued silently sleeping, only occasionally making soft grunting noises.

"What will you do now?" Eckhart asked.

"I have to stay with him in case any complications arise," she explained. "This is a critical time in his healing. You're welcome to stay if you'd like, but it's fine too if you'd rather not."

"Perhaps I *will* stay for a bit," Eckhart said nonchalantly. "Can you tell me a story? My master used to tell me many tales, most of which were about his purported greatness and the greatness of the Sith. I hope yours will be more interesting."

Over the course of the next hour, Edy went on to tell him stories of the Celestials and the Elder Races in the age before the galaxy became engulfed in war. They reminded Eckhart of the stories his mother used to recite to him when he was still in his yolk sac which had always intrigued him. So, he listened, sometimes asking questions and often looking over at the Gundark, wondering if he would survive and, if not, if Edy would be too upset if he ate him. He comforted himself in the thought that she seemed rather pragmatic for a youngling.

The search party that included her father now returned to the monastery where Erront had the unpleasant task of informing them that Edy had left in search of the creature. Fearing the worst, for her father had well known her objections to killing the beast, they ran off to find her, focusing on the areas they hadn't previously explored. When, at last, their torches spotted her sitting alongside not only a Great Gundark but an Anacondan, they became greatly alarmed. But she'd heard them arriving, and without a word she put out a hand to silence them. After they stopped shouting and crying, she made it clear that these were her new friends and that under no circumstances were they to be harmed.

"Are *you* their master?" Eckhart asked Edy, marveling. She looked at him sideways, as if to remind him of what she'd said a minute earlier about keeping a low

profile. Vanukel had now fully awoken. He'd been half-listening to her amazing stories when the group arrived. Edy took him by the hand, informing him that these people were friends who would provide him food and shelter. The Gundark was not comfortable around large groups of people, and the presence of the Anacondan hadn't exactly reassured him, but he also knew that he should be dead and that the only reason he wasn't was because of this girl. So, languidly, the Gundark arose, displaying submissiveness.

In a train, Edy led her new companions to cozy rooms in the monastery, passing by many surprised faces and some not so surprised. As promised, Vanukel was given a comfortable bed and brought food, water, healing herbs, dressings, and blankets by a Caarite nurse. Eckhart was given similar treatment, though with more of a focus on food. Edy popped in each room to say goodnight to them. Unaccustomed to hospitality and lodging indoors, they both experienced a feeling of panic that this might all be an elaborate trap, but when that passed, they felt wonder at the strange turn of events and the even odder kindness of these people. When they finally fell asleep, they dreamt of the stories Edy had told them, of unusual light-beings dancing in the dusky sky as they gently lit up the night, of a copious spread of food, and of a warm sunset with a gathering of beings of all shapes and sizes.

Edy, meanwhile, had to put up with a long lecture from her father and the Abbesses concerning the Gundark and Anacondan and her overall recklessness. In the end, they agreed to continue to provide them with sustenance but insisted they be accompanied by guards at all times wherever they went. Edy agreed, but only on the conditions that they be called *escorts* and that she be allowed to choose them, explaining that her new friends had had bad past experiences with members of other species and, therefore, had to learn to trust again.

Rolling his eyes in exasperation, Topher reminded his daughter that she was not in charge here, but Lady Asher, suppressing a laugh, agreed to her provisions.

As the days passed, the garrulous Anacondan and the pensive Vanukel proved faithful and true, and never did they forget the kindness they'd been shown.

By the following year, they were themselves on guard duty.

The Sith Sorcerer had returned, and with him an army of Rozzum passed through the Hypergate to Esseles. Included in this number were Ng'ok from the Badlands of N'g'zi, K'lor'slug of Noe'ha'on, Molator of Oroboro, M'onnok from Socorro, and Scrimp from S'krrr.

The Esseles Hypergate was one of few left standing in the War of Temporal Planes, as it had been decreed that open refugee cities should be the last to see their gates destroyed in the event that a displaced people had to be quickly evacuated. Since Esseles held no strategic value, and the pacifistic Essulines could hardly be considered a target worthy of anyone's time and resources, the looming questions amongst them was *why* had Cainspar come back? Why had he come a year ago, and how had he been repelled back then? One thing they knew was that no one who intended only to talk came with an army.

Edy and Vanukel had been patrolling outside the perimeter when it happened. She shouldn't have been there, but she claimed that something was amiss, and when she got one of *those* feelings, there was little anyone could do to stop her. And as far as Vanukel was concerned, her word was law. The Gundark soon sniffed out the danger.

"Your creature would make for a fine brood mate of my own," Lord Cainspar said, creeping out from behind a large lacecap hydrangea. "I wonder how you managed to tame him. Perhaps you can show me. You would certainly brighten up my palace in Udolpho! And I have yet no queen…"

"We have nothing for you!" she demanded fearlessly. "Why are you *here?"*

"Perhaps I'm here for you!" he teased. "You have some… *ability* I could use."

"Only a coward threatens unarmed civilians," she growled.

As he was making a retort, Vanukel charged him. She would herself have run after him had she not heard a voice urging her to *run!* Ruefully, she obeyed.

The Gundark returned to the keep hours later gravely injured. Several of his spinal horns had been shorn off. This time, despite all the ministrations they provided, Vanukel died, but not before bestowing on his tearful companion one of his broken horns, his largest, which for some odd reason he'd held onto. Edy wept night and day for her fallen friend. Even the stoic Eckhart grieved, as did many of those who'd come to know their valiant paladin.

Once again, Edy had a vision: Vanukel appeared before her, healed and glorious in appearance. He said that she should weep for him no more but to bring his horn to Lady Asher, who would know what to do with it. Edy awoke from the vision and did as she was told. The Abbesses were actually not sure what to do with the object, but they trusted in the young girl's gifts. Yet, after several ablutions and benedictions, the Horn of Vanukel, although certainly cleaner than before, seemed no different.

Unfortunately, the scene outside had turned grim. Hundreds of wicked-looking creatures massed forebodingly upon the once-pristine plains. When word arrived from a Tarong that the Hypergate would not function, blocked as it was by some dark spell, the Essulines knew that no help would be coming from their allies.

The ringing of the bells startled even Lady Asher, who sent Eckhart along with Tarhur the Tarong and Noajan the Conjeni, who were inseparable, to answer the summons at the western main door. There, the crimson-skinned, black-armored Lord Cainspar awaited, requesting parley with the Abbesses. Noajan demanded that he relinquish his weapons, which he handed to Tarhur and was grudgingly permitted entrance. "So, this is where you slithered off to, my faithless worm," the Sakeru said with a smile to Eckhart. As he was led past the narthex and nave to the chapterhouse, he added, "You'd have fared better with me, Snake. At least then, you'd have lived."

"Continue speaking," Eckhart warned, "and I will swallow you where you stand."

The sorcerer's smile grew broader, but he said no more. Eckhart joined the Tarong and Conjeni to stand guard outside the room the Abbesses had chosen for the meeting. The chapterhouse was richly adorned with scenes of the Precursors during the Vernal Splendour. Upon the entire ceiling was painted a fresco of the Celestials at the dawn of creation. They offered him no drink or food, as was customary, but

Cainspar was still pleasantly surprised. He had expected creaky old women in heavy fabrics, not the youthful beauties that now greeted him, none more striking than the copper-haired Lady Asher herself. She was of Sephi-Human stock by the looks of her, garbed in a long-sleeved kimono worn as a robe over a simple but elegant black tunic with floral patterns. He looked upon her salaciously. She returned his gaze with a sardonic smile. *There is a clear strength to her! Even if their order is steeped in the propagation of myths, these women, at least, are no mere pretenders,* he thought.

He examined the other six; there were two races he could not identify, including a cone-shaped fungal creature with a head like a giant petaled flower. Of those he did recognize were some Humans; a Qu'utian out of Qu'ut Prime, a graceful race who belied their ethereal beauty in having single-handedly kept enemy forces out of the south spiral arm; a formidable pterosaur-like being from Sesharrim known as a Gaoul; and a Cantrosian, he surmised; felinoid races looked all the same to him. They all bore similar garb with variations on the color scheme, though their hoods remained over their heads. *True believers,* he scoffed, *though, for a religious order, they look surprisingly bohemian.*

After an awkward introduction to Lady Asher and the Abbesses, Lord Cainspar said, "It is clear why you are held in such honor and esteem. Why do you *insist* on wasting it on the propagation of untruths?" Cainspar pointed to the paintings that covered the walls. "I don't mean to *blaspheme…*" the curl on his lips made it clear that he did, "but as you are all adults, let us speak plainly: you know there are no Celestials, no Supreme Maker, no benevolent Great Creator who is going to rescue the galaxy, and even if there were such, these would clearly be on *our* side. This falsehood that you teach has prevented many from joining with us as allies against the Firstborn Menace—they who would deny the majesty and authority of the rightful powers of this realm by keeping you enslaved through the lie of egalitarianism."

Lady Asher nodded graciously as she stepped forward. "I've taken the liberty to do some research into your history, which your second arrival precipitated. Prior to the wars, your people were the Adah of Adin, an offspring race of the Firstborn Sicmoo who led their brothers and progeny at the dawn of the Empyrean Wars. They now, oddly, call themselves *Bith*. The records are unclear, but I have learned that after the rulers of Adah betrayed their people and pledged themselves to those sinister beings worshipped by the Sith, they subsequently disappeared, only to return some years later… *different*. These divergent branches of the Adah were thereafter sent to conquer different worlds; the Sakeru to Sarrish, the Sakiyans to Saki…."

Cainspar remained unperturbed. "If what you say is true, then these wondrous *beings,* as you call them, elevated us from our primitivism—for we were all bestial and base creatures before recorded memory—and whether by accident or whim, it is they who gave us the spark that woke us from our torpor. *Firstborn* is merely a term for those races that achieved civilization first. But it matters not. I am now properly regarded as a Sith, and we do not waste time looking backwards. After all, are not each of us still beasts who must fight and claw our way to the top or be trampled?" The Abbess smiled, but her eyes said she thought the notion foolish. "Yes, I forget.

Your order holds to more *archaic* beliefs. Just so; let us pretend these are true for a moment. You are part Sephi by the looks of you, and we are none of us pure as you so eloquently pointed out. Still, there is enough of that once-glorious race in you to know that it is not merely the loss of peace that your people mourn but *serenity*. While we Sith have found serenity in our actions, conquest, and establishment of order, you long for the halcyon days of old."

"If you had seen those days, so would you," she replied.

He looked oddly at her. "You are not so very old, nor immortal. You speak of things written in storybooks that reflect idealistic thinking. The Sephi were ever so."

"We are blessed with several gifts," Lady Ariana stated, removing her hood as she spoke, "including visions of the past." *Another great beauty*, Cainspar thought. *Shame they were fools, conflating dreams with power. Still, they will make for a good harem once I capture them, their sorrow rendering them even more beautiful!*

"And here stands amongst you, as an equal, a Human!" Cainspar exclaimed, indicating Lady Ariana. "By your own mythology that you claim is the incontrovertible truth, tell me, Lady Asher, was it not the Architects and their Human *pets* that first brought about the end of your glorious Golden Age?"

"Had not the Sith exploited the situation for their own ends…"

"We can agree on our opportunistism if not whether it is good or evil. Nevertheless, you cannot disagree that the Humans were part of the catalyst for the Grieving, the period in which the galaxy fell in your view, correct?"

"That is correct, but Humans are not *one* thing," she added quickly before he could interject. "There are good, bad, and an admixture of the two amongst them."

"Be that as it may, you adjusted your ethical standards to allow for a new paradigm, one that allows lesser beings, such as Humans… and *others*," he looked at the more exotic races, "to walk amongst you; some might even say to *pollute* you. Do not be offended, dear Ladies, for so too have we embraced the strangers in our midst! If the Bringers of Chaos can be admitted into your very circle, can you not see the need to adjust your standards once again to accept a new galactic order in which the best amongst us are at the top? *Surely*, you understand this. Your own religion is hierarchical in nature, with the Father of Lights at the top, the Celestials beneath, the Firstborn on the next tier, their offspring below, and the beasts beneath that."

Lady Asher had rushed into this trap. She would be more careful moving forward. "The outward structure may be similar, but its inner nature is wholly different. Where the Sith see the right of those on top to *oppress* and do as they please with those less powerful, we see the possession of power as a grave responsibility and use it to *serve* those with less. Whereas you use position for iron-clad dominance and violence against those who disagree, we use it for love and freedom, even for those who wish independence from us. So, no, the paradigm has not shifted, nor have our ethical standards been adjusted even as the spread of pernicious beliefs has changed the galaxy. But just as Humans are of varying alignments, so are all peoples. It is by attitudes and behaviors that we discern friend from foe."

"And yet because we are seekers not shepherds, you judge the Sith to be evil?"

"You are judged by the great harm you commit and justify. Can you not see how such teachings have led to evil? Or is your heart so blackened that the enslavement and murder of innocents is as meaningless as the fall of leaves in Autumn?"

"Is *order* no longer a commendable trait?" Cainspar rejoined. "The Judicious also engage in violence, believing their actions to be good. Despite what you would deem the *mistreatment* of those beneath them, I do not hear your opposition to *them*."

"We are not of the Judicious but of the Resolute. Our disagreement with their methods has long been made known, nor do we condone their actions."

"It would seem to the eyes of many that you *favor* them nonetheless."

"For their crimes, they will answer, but never have they committed offenses as grave as what your people did to the Asmerukii, the Catumen, and others too many to recount."

"Perhaps it was *they* who were the aggressors; neither of us was present to judge."

"That is beneath you, Lord Cainspar," she rebutted. "All by now have heard of the gruesome acts the Sith have committed. Your people have proudly boasted of them."

"Let us agree to disagree and put that aside to focus on the present. I have been sent to procure your allegiance… or, if nothing else, your *cooperation*. If you truly value life and seek to secure the peace you value so highly, then spread the word to stand down before the natural masters of this realm and *we*, their emissaries. You are free to *believe* whatever fairy tales suit you, but the dissemination and proselytization of literature promoting the Celestials or the beliefs of the Resolute *must* cease."

"You seem to think we have greater authority in this galaxy than we do!"

"Come, let us not play games, Lady Asher. The Essulines are known galaxy-wide as the Preceptors of the Way, the Keepers of the Breath, and the Minders of the Source; you well know that on *your word alone*, you could stop this conflict that you so detest."

"Perhaps… if we were to lie and impel those who've placed their trust in us to bow before the cruel whips of those abominations you call *masters*."

"Then, I'm afraid, the end is hand, and you will see if your beliefs are correct."

"That may be," Lady Asher acknowledged with an enigmatic look the sorcerer was quickly coming to detest. "You know, it is no small tragedy to fall to such depths, sacrificing innocents before demons masquerading as gods and spreading the pestilence of war. This is a betrayal of who you once were. And it is for this reason that your masters fashioned a myth to make it appear that only chaos and cruelty are the natural state. But it is *not* the truth, as any advocate of the Sacred Way knows…"

"You teach of the Way but know so *little* of it. Could you but taste the power that the Ancient Ones have bestowed on their faithful servants, you would know it is no myth and do anything to attain it! It does not care for your ideals. It has no will; it is only a font of power from which those who grasp it can drink."

"For those who see no distinction between what is noble and what is debased, indeed, the truth becomes a lie and the lie, truth, but that does not make it so."

"Does not our power *prove* the truth of our words?" Cainspar asked. "Where was your Maker when the Taung were driven off Notron? Where were the Celestials when

the Dragon hordes set aflame world after world? When the Vorsuul system was being emptied of all life, what Angels descended to stop them? *None!* Where are your saviors now that you stand at the doorstep of death? If there ever was a Maker, he has hidden his face from you; your Celestials have abandoned this galaxy."

"You speak as if they betrayed us when it is *we* who betrayed *them*," asserted Lady Asher, "as if they owe us, and not we who owe them for all that they have given us, gifts that we squandered. The threat of death that the Sith so casually wave about cannot change what is right and wrong. And since it cannot, nor will it change our minds and hearts. The Sith and your false gods intimidate us no more than the axe intimidates the earth. You may fell many trees which split from the ground, but the earth remains solid, ready to produce more."

"Not if the earth is destroyed as well…" The sorcerer held a glint in his eye, pleased to see his words had caused Lady Asher to slightly stiffen. "I see I have, at last, shaken you out of your self-righteousness."

"It is not that," she said, at last. "It is that I understand now. The Sith have taught you to believe you are greater than all others. Is that not what the word *Sith* means—*supreme*? Whether through force of will or the guileful outwitting of your opponents, you think this gives you the right to dominate the stars and do as you will." She laughed despite herself, causing some of her sisters to laugh as well, turning Cainspar's smile into a scowl. "Your people are like truculent children. You would sacrifice *all* that is good, and for what? Power? *What good is a scorched galaxy?!*"

"Power is all that matters in this universe—it alone will break our chains."

"*You've placed those chains on yourselves!*" she said, exasperated at his inability to see what seemed so obvious. "And they grow only heavier as you do harm to others. As to power, have you heard of the massive Drugon brought down by a colony of tiny Water Cyc? Do you know of the Dune Cactus of Aduba-3 which overcomes the arid soil and intense heat of the sun to produce the most delicate of flowers? Have you never seen how the lowliest of beings overcome the most staggering odds by virtue of love? If all these great and powerful things are *powerless* against the small and lowly, what is a paltry *empire*? No, Lord Cainspar. Domination, cruelty, destruction, these are the ways of the parasite. Turn aside from this ignoble path. What need have you of vile monsters who lure selfish, broken souls with duplicity and occult arts? Join us instead, for we have riches more than these… One day of real peace, charity, and fellowship is greater than a thousand spent in fear, violence, and hate."

Lady Asher's words brought back a time during Cainspar's childhood when he'd longed for good to triumph over evil, for justice to hold sway; and for a moment, he considered her words… But then he recalled how his cold father and wanton mother had driven all such notions from his head and heart, and a shadow passed over the sorcerer's face. "Love and flowers and nonsense! I have heard of some who gave up the glory of the Sith for your cause, but never did I understood why until this moment. Your words are indeed persuasive, as my masters warned. But I will never turn—certainly not for this… *pathetic* existence. I'm afraid your subtle argument, though well woven, has failed to ensnare me. You are but weak women crowned as

majesties, hiding in some dusty monastery, teaching things of which you know little… Yes, I can feel your hatred and disgust as I speak to you the truth. It's only natural you'd want to see me dead. Why deny it and pretend otherwise?"

"It would be a great relief to know you were no longer a threat," she acknowledged. "But a far greater one would be to know you had chosen to side with *life*."

"You outnumber me. Your formidable guards stand outside the door. No doubt my old Snake could do some damage. You find my ideology, organization, and person repugnant. *Do what you will!*"

Lady Asher turned to face her fellow Abesses. "And *that* is the spreading stain of evil," she said as if teaching a class. "It operates by contaminating the mind, heart, and spirit, convincing us that it is only just and natural to take a life. Why is it not?"

As another Abbess pulled off her hood, Cainspar's eyes widened at the raven-haired splendor. "Because it steals all future possibilities, including the potential to change," Lady Monserrat said. "Lord Cainspar said it from his own mouth: other Sith have renounced the dark. We, therefore, cannot be judge, jury, and executioner."

The Sith sighed. "Even if everything you say and believe is true, it *doesn't* matter," he added earnestly. "The worlds are changing, and as the shroud comes to settle upon each, *we* must change with them or perish in the fields. You are dreamers vainly pursuing a vanished past or some impossible future, but I am a pragmatist. We will never see eye to eye. Unfortunately for you, you are also in our way, spreading dangerous idealism. Therefore, you must die. Shall I do it now to spare you a much more painful death at the hands of my army? Perhaps your speeches have stirred me after all, for it is a charity you would not receive at the hands of another." He unsheathed a blade he'd kept concealed. "Let us see if your Maker will save you."

"Whether he does or not," she said, "we are with the One, and the One is with us."

The Abbesses now began to chant in a deep, thrumming voice that rolled in waves as the volume, pitch, and cadence changed, a haunting melody infused with peril. Cainspar looked around at the mixed assemblage and, lifting his sword, advanced on Lady Asher to strike her first. He'd wanted to enslave her, but with her dead the others would likely submit. And they were just as nice.

But with his first step, his sword shattered, and—impossibly—he began to rise into the air. "How can this be?" he shouted. "I sense no power in you!"

"You have the form of something," Lady Sixta explained, "but not the substance, and you confuse the one with the other. Why do you think your masters twice sent you with an *army* to defeat a weaponless community? Certainly you see it, don't you? We are a danger *because* we speak the truth, and that has always been the greatest threat to the lie."

"The worlds *are* changing as you've rightly surmised," Lady Monserrat started, "but that is all the more reason to shine brighter, for Darkness cannot abide Light."

"Real power can only be found in the light of compassion and self-sacrifice," Lady Delfina intoned.

"Cruelty and unrestrained anger are signs of weakness," added Lady Basalisa.

"Your masters reject the truth because they are consumed by aggravated avarice and have no interest or patience for that which is just, kind, noble, or true," Lady Ariana finished.

Cainspar was set free of his invisible bonds. "Ponder that," stated Lady Asher. "So long as there is life, there is hope. You were brought here under a banner of truce. We honor that still…"

Cainspar picked himself up with as much dignity as he could muster. "Unless *I* save you, you will all be dead by dawn," he croaked and pushed open the chamber's doors, flinging himself past the guards.

"Are you certain I shouldn't just kill him?" Eckhart asked after he ran out.

"Certainty is not a gift I've been granted," Lady Asher said. "No, best leave him for now. The Eternal has given all free will to use wisely or foolishly as each decides. It is one thing to defend and another to needlessly take life. Not even Cainspar is beyond redemption. Perhaps he may reconsider now that he's seen the error of his ways."

"*Not likely!* I know him better than most. You've hurt his precious pride. He won't easily forget that."

"Should we die tomorrow, good Anacondan, then I will see you again in another world." And with that enigmatic smile that Eckhart found so intriguing, she departed.

Eckhart didn't return to his quarters right away. Ensuring that everyone was in their chambers, he made his way to the dusky orchard and through the hidden egress.

"You're late!" Cainspar snarled, irritated by the serpent's sudden appearance. "What have you learned?"

"A way into the back of the keep… It is a hidden breach in the garden wall."

"Is that it?" the Sith demanded.

"I can't exactly draw you a map, Master, but with your great powers, I have no doubt you'll easily locate it." Eckhart turned to slither back into the foliage.

"And where are you going? By the midmorning, this keep will be under assault."

"I have my *own* revenge to take." And with that, the Anacondan silently glided away. A short time later, Eckhart crept quietly into Edy's bedroom and coiled up before her to await the dawn. He didn't sleep. Few did that night. Despite having erected barricades over windows and doors so that they might sleep with some measure of security, most rose before daybreak to watch and wait and call upon aid.

Ere the rising of the sun above the peaks of Mount Zadok, the foul races of Illathurion began their assault on the protective shield that ran across the perimeter of the outer wall of the keep. After a few hours of ground emplacements and artillery bombardments, it was down. Cainspar could have used the same munitions to blow a hole in the Abbey itself, but he'd come to hate Lady Asher so vehemently that he wanted to witness her humiliation as her charges suffered and died. Then, once her faith had crumbled, he would bring her before his masters, for it was clear now that she at least held hidden power. While he appropriated her keep, *they* would show her *the Way*.

"It is a common misconception that the Sith care only for cobweb-filled castles concealing traps and treasure-hoards and dank dungeons crawling with horrors," he offhandedly told the underling that had come to report the breach. The Molator

nodded absently, either in dutiful assent or plain stupidity, Cainspar concluded sourly. Dismissing the horrid-looking creature, he took notice of how lovely the gardens were. At this time of year, the sea winds descended on Mount Hyrcanus in a dry foehn that bled the petals in a false-autumnal flush, causing the leaves to fleck and mottle. A part of him felt regret that he had to kill these people. It was not their personal delusions that bothered him—the Sith held many strange and contradictory beliefs—but rather the effect that their particular delusion had on his foes.

The Essulines and their incessant gibberish about prophecies, Sons of Light, and Guardians of the Dawn gave their admirers hope and a way to mitigate their guilt for opposing their rightful rulers. And so the war carried on longer than it should have. But the Essulines refused to see that it was *they* who were perpetuating the conflict. *The delusion has to die—and that means killing those who foster it. But perhaps I will spare some favorites to serve as my personal odalisques!*

The sounds of footsteps echoed loud in the corridor. Lady Asher already knew what Edy was going to suggest when she breathlessly ran up to her that morning. "I suppose it can't hurt," she said. "Ask your father to join us."

By the time Edy and Topher Uar arrived, the end was nearly upon them. Cainspar's armies were throwing themselves at the Abbey's windows and doors, and before long, crashes could be heard as arms and appendages began breaking through. *Death has come for us… not merely for us, for we are but agents, but for what we represent.* Lady Asher led father and daughter down the long passageways of the mysterious cloister past its grand architectural arcade and rich, rib-vaulted roof. The sun was just beginning to shine through the multicolored lumiglass windows, creating a gentle bioluminescence within the chamber. The aromatic upper gardens bloomed lush with rare and exotic plants that had been collected from across the galaxy and cultivated with great care over many years. Were it not for the fact that darkness awaited outside—the massed army in the valley below now visible from this vantage point—it would have been a glorious day. But at this moment it felt funereal, a haunting reminder of all the good that was sacrificed in war.

"Here is the loudest resonance in the monastery," Lady Asher said to Topher, "as you might recall from the times you spent in this hall singing at the top of your lungs."

He laughed at the childhood memory. "I remember a few times you joined in!"

Dorelle Asher herself had scarcely been a child at the time, a red-headed orphan new to standing on her own two legs, with neither ambition nor the concept of one day becoming Lady of the Manor. Yet few had so sober a disposition at so young an age, so exceptional a mind that would not rest on established conventions, so insatiable a hunger to learn, devouring a staggering number of books in the Great Library. Other organizations and individuals would have resented her incessant questions and challenges. The Essulines embraced it, teaching the girl how to search for answers, how to discern truths from falsehoods, and how to live in accordance with the principles of honor and ethics—as her mother Korintha had before her, before she was ruthlessly struck down by the consumption that had taken so many.

Turning serious, she said, "I honestly don't know if this will work, but your daughter has achieved more than one miracle already; if there's going to be another, here and now seems the appropriate place and time for it."

Edy Uar had proven to be extraordinary in her own way. Though not as studious as Lady Asher would have preferred, nor as disciplined, her compassion and devotion to living beings knew no bounds.

She handed Topher the Horn of Vanukel, which gave him a moment's pause to look upon his daughter's controlled grief. His own heart broke, wondering if she'd be alive after today; if she'd grow old enough to experience life, love, and loss…

Lady Asher steadied him. "Before you begin, let us recite the *Orison of Strength*." Holding out a hand on either side, they both grasped it and began the old hymn:

> I do not fear, not death nor time, no circling rhythm in the pines,
> No glimmering face that sickly shines…
> I fear not age, nor creaking bone, nor words of evil carved in stone,
> No sneering shadow of the crone…
> I fear not the storm or blight, nor any thing that walks by night,
> Nor hate that hides in plainest sight…
> I do not fear, not death nor time, no wicked voices in the mind,
> The creeping chaos feigned benign…
> For all the gifts the Maker gave are greater than the shadowed grave…

"You may go ahead now," the Lady said. Wasting no time, Topher mightily blew upon the horn. The sounds it produced were oddly bittersweet and louder than he'd anticipated, almost as if their bassoon notes could actually reach to the Heavens. It did at least reach the ears of the advancing creatures who stopped in their tracks.

The response was not immediate, but it was timely. Through the Hypergate, somehow rendered functional, burst a force of Kintan Striders, Mantellian Savrips, Ghhhk, Houjix, and Kúklops (known as the Bulbous). With a great howl of warning, they rushed upon the mephitic invaders, the Ng'ok, K'lor'slug, Molator, M'onnok, and Scrimp, who turned in surprise to face the unanticipated threat.[155]

The three watched in amazement as their defenders engaged the host of Cainspar, hopeful now that their people might just survive, but dismayed by the fact that other lives had to be lost to do so, and they mourned even the raiders, for they were victims as well, having either been subjugated by a superior force or misled by pernicious lies.

But within the hour, the tide of battle turned against the rescuers. "He's using his powers," Edy revealed. "I can *feel* it." Her father looked at her and nodded. He'd long suspected she'd inherited her mother's gifts.

Lady Asher wondered now if she shouldn't have set Eckhart against him, but she quashed the thought. Murder was not the way of the Light, she knew, though at the

[155] While Bith scientists claim the Ghhhk emerged from mutated wildlife, the shy creatures had always been on Clak'dor VII; their mating cries mistaken for those of hootbats.

moment it felt like cold comfort. *No one ever promised this path would be easy*. She left to gather her sisters, only to seize up as she began choking and turning blue. A rap at the window behind them caused Edy and her father to spin around. Lord Cainspar stood on the other side of it, grinning haughtily.

His senses then picked up a familiar presence. "Ah, Snake! Just in time to watch my triumph over these self-righteous, simple-minded fools!"

"Is that what you think I'm here for?"

"Aww, poor Snake," Cainspar mocked. "Have you fallen for your little mistress?"

"*Eckhart is my name*," he said, dropping down from the orchid-covered oak that stood above him. In the blink of an eye, the Anacondan had wrapped himself around Cainspar, forcing him to release his telekinetic hold on Lady Asher's throat.

Lord Cainspar's rage took hold. "How *dare* you assault me? Your ancestors would *tear… you… to… pieces!*" But his voice faltered as the thirty-foot, serpentine creature continued crushing the trachea of his hated master.

"Your Ssither are no ancestors of mine!" he laughed. "I am Anacondan. If you had bothered to learn anything beyond the lies you've been fed, you might know that our ancestors are the Firstborn Hysalrians…"

No longer able to speak, Cainspar struggled, puzzled as to why he could not psychically grab hold of the creature.

"…And then you would know that we are *immune* to your spells!"

As the realization of that set in, Cainspar reached for his sword, but his arms were pinned to his side. "I wasn't sure if it was true," Eckhart continued, "so I lured you here, knowing you wouldn't pay me any mind." Cainspar's eyes widened at the recognition of his mistake. Eckhart's own eyes shone with a malicious gleam as he struck at Cainspar's face faster than any could see. Then, with a vicious and satisfying *crunch*, he tightened his massive body around the trapped and wriggling sorcerer, squeezing with five tons of pressure. Circulatory collapse followed, and Eckhart could feel the shriveled heart of the hateful Sith stop beating. Engulfing the rest of his body proved no hard task and he readied himself for slow digestion. His stomach's strong acids would soon begin to break down the meal. Offering a sheepish grin to his onlookers, the Anacondan rested contentedly beneath the meiloorun tree.

Lady Asher nodded in return and escorted her friends away from the grim scene to watch the even grimmer battle taking place below. Topher got an idea and picked up the Horn of Vanukel to blow upon it once more. "I don't think it works like that," Lady Asher said.

"You never know!"

The Battle of Ten, as it was called, was won by the defenders of Esseles and remembered for long afterwards. And because so many had seen it, it came to be memorialized in song and film and imagined as a popular variant of the ancient game of Jetan or Chess, along with Novacrown, Moebius, and *Shah-tezh*, and called in the

Aargauese tongue, *Dejarik*, translated as "In the Trenches," though some called it *Vrax*, which meant "Wreck," an apt depiction of its ugly outcome.[156]

The Abbesses healed all whom they could, friend or foe, and sent each back to their respective homeworlds. Although Edy wanted to adopt two of each, the Abbesses limited her to only one of each of their allies and *only* if they wished to stay. The Horn of Vanukel was displayed in a place of honor. Years later, after they moved, it would be placed in safekeeping in a storehouse of artifacts and ancient scrolls.[157]

It had been called a "great victory," and a providential one at that, but to Lady Asher, it felt like the start of a slow decline.

The days played out as before but with a tinge of gloom. The Abbey's halls felt colder, the skies greyer; even the gardens seemed damper, weedier, less wholesome and productive. Evil had been vanquished, but the taint of it yet lingered as a hidden pall.

"It is time…" she announced one day. "Before we descend into fearful rigidity and misguided rules, before institutionalization takes hold and the invisible, mouldering rot haunting this Abbey infests our souls, we must start anew, for as with all life, we are meant to grow and so move onto the next stage in the unfolding *Mystery*."

The Essulines relocated, some to Tau Rak and some to Thape. Those on Thape would be joined by those from Ravaath who'd been sent by Marutz (whom they knew as Ravaa). In friendship, they mingled practices and learned from one another's philosophies, and many years hence, they moved again, this time to Ando Prime, where the Talids who joined them came to call their community the *Dai Bendu*, which translates to both the Circle of the Benders and the Center of the Bound.

Those who manifested Force abilities, as had Edy, the Abbesses, and their later offspring, were called *Jed* (master) with those they trained called *Pad* (student), words that come down to us from the Force-sensitive descendents of the Jeddak (king) and Jeddara (queen) of Tammuz-an who'd joined the Dai Bendu around the same time as the Followers of Palawa (word), the Temple of the Source, and the Academy of the Way to study and develop their psionic powers. Thus, the *Je'daii Bendu* came to refer to the community of Force-wielders amongst the Bendu.

The most famous descendant of the Asher and Uar families was Dorelle Asher II, who came to acclaim as the Sith Slayer and Cobalt Jedi. In one of her many adventures, she eradicated the corrupt Planet Masters of Xerxes who had been leaders of the Je'daii Bendu before they turned to the Way of the Dark in order to steer the galaxy along a more pragmatic and crueler path. Decades after his ascension in the haunted pyramid of Morganthus, Master Cabren, the last of the wicked Planet Masters, as they came to call themselves, lured Dorelle Asher in an elaborate plot to exact revenge. After considerable struggle, beset by many foul things, she split open him his wicked body and so ended his reign, saving the lives of untold many.

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[156] Due to its application to Chess, two pieces were removed, the Bulbous and Scrimp.

[157] The scrolls were recovered nearly a century ago, though for dubious reasons their translations were not released until recently. Much speculation with scant comprehension has been made of them since.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE
ENIGMA OF THE ABSOLUTE

SECTION I: DESTROY THE DARK OVERLORDS!

Although the Dark Overlords were not as powerful in the Skyriver realm as they had been in their own, they were nevertheless potent and intelligent. They knew the voices of their masters and eagerly sought to obey. Also, they had allied with Typhojem, for whom they had been given a task: to find the means of eradicating the Celestials. To that end, they had searched far and wide for the angle-traps, psychocrystals, mind-traps, and soul-snares, and so had come to Urthha to secure the energy-imbued shards from the great diamond formation in its core.

The Dark Overlords descended two miles beneath the crust, passing the strange cities of the Infernal Beasts, gargantuan inhumanoids imprisoned or trapped by the mad Archetypes long ago fashioned by the Architects to serve as Elementals for Urthha. They were fortunate too in that they circumvented the quasi-deities yet dwelling in the realm below what in ancient days was known as the Eiglophian mountains. It took some time, but once they acquired the requisite components, including a rare soul-snare, they began to forge them into a diamond-like crystal weapon they called the Soul-Destroyer, which could not only capture spirits but destroy them.

The Dark Overlords readied themselves to depart, but then, as if melting out of the very landscape around them, gigantic, globular, floating beings with inchoate features appeared. With them were some of their Mutore offspring. One of the Granite Mutores hidden nearby got ahold of the Soul-Destroyer and turned it on the Hell-Lord Rectus, who wailed as his form was disintegrated. The other Dark Overlords turned to fight and retrieve the weapon, but the Mutore was quicker and disappeared into the earth. The mad Archetypes laughed, took the soul-snare that powered the Soul-Destroyer, and destroyed the crystal weapon.

At that moment, the Shadow Kings descended before the Dark Overlords, appearing in partly corporeal black armor. They had earlier been summoned to Urthha by chthonic sorcerers who served their dread masters. None know the chaos of minds who serve the ruinous powers, save that they wandered the earth for some time, influencing Men to evil and haunting the catacombs of Chaon Gacca before getting sent to the underworld and forced to lurk in deepest darkness away from the unquenchable fires that annihilate their kind. Eventually, they were summoned back to the surface by the necromancer Namirrha, but not before they had come upon a hidden Infinity Gate concealed long ago in the most ancient of Urthhan days.

"Destroy the Archetypes!" the Dark Overlords commanded them.

But the cruel entities merely stood there silently, watching with gleaming eyes the scene before them. Bowing in respect, one of the Archetypes said, "The Lord of all Uncleanness does not wish a weapon that can also harm his unholy fission." And with that speech, the Archetypes departed.

"Why did you do nothing?" demanded Thog, the Demon-Lord of Xuthal and king of the Dark Overlords. "At your very touch, they'd have blackened and died!"

"The obliquitousss aegisss of Sominusss doesss not concern usss," they hissed.

This speech infuriated Thog, but there was nothing he could do.

"Though manifold are their ciphers and innumerable their servants, are not our hidden Masters one and the same?" insisted the Demon-Lord Béchutiste.

"It is pointless to argue with the Shadows of Eld," Carcerot of the Hell-Lords informed his fellows, "for they see all other realms and servants as insignificant."

"Weee have seeen the pathetic disarraaay that is your Dark Diiimension," the Shadow Being sibilated scornfully. "When Skyyyriver has been conquered by our mastersss, they will seeek out such lessser realmsss, for there will no longer be a dissstinction… and the wretched omniverssse will be swallowed in darknesss and be no more. If you seek to serve the *true* Powersss in this universe ere our coming darknesss, heed the summonsss that is forthcoming…"

"We are on a mission for the Great Priest!" Thog charged. "Had you arrived sooner, we'd have had a weapon that could eliminate the Beings of Unimaginable Light!"

The Shadow scoffed. His voice deepened and grew more clipped. "No, Demon-Lord, you had but a *trinket*! But with *this*…" the Shadow-Being deposited before them a great crystal they'd never before seen, "you might construct a proper weapon!"

"What is it?" Carcerot inquired.

"It is known as *Rax*!" The Shadow Being grew fainter. "It is half of the sentient Orax crystal stolen from Luminaire by one of our many subjects and given to us." With that, the Shadow Kings seemed to burn away and were no longer seen by them.

When the new Soul-Destroyer was constructed, it gleamed with a deadly light.

"Despite our loss, this day has been a victory!" Carcerot declared.

"Our victory is not complete," Thog returned. "We must deliver this prize to the Great Priest."

"When do we return to our realm?" Béchutiste asked, impatient to be off.

"*This* is our realm now…" Carcerot corrected. "We will await the summons."

They would soon enough hear the summons that the Shadow Kings had spoken of as fluttering, whispered voices that emanated from the dimensional cracks and fault lines. Following their instructions, they traveled to an unseen and undiscovered planet in Urthha's system and there laid down their title as Dark Overlords to instead become the Dark Apostles. They would herald and shepherd the return of war.

Concerning the soul-snare, the Mutore cast inviolate spells over the angle-trap, seeking to ensure that the Shadow Being that yet lay unreleased within it remained imprisoned, for they did not pay allegiance to any of the foul powers the mad Archetypes deferred to.

An age would pass before an earthquake of ill-omen broke the enclosure and a team of miners unearthed the entombed soul-snare. Most of them would not survive what followed, but the few who did were changed and so came about the Cult of the Headless Snake. This tale is told elsewhere, save to say this: calling the power that emanated from the prism *the Basis*, the Cult of the Headless Sanke used it to bring great horrors into the galaxy.

SECTION II: HAUNTED STARS

THE FOURTH EMPIRE
2116-2352 NE

The Alliance of Free Stars would have their hands full during Cyrannis' transition to a new government. They first came under attack by the Hierarchy, an empire of predacious lepidopterans who called themselves the Urquan. The lepidopterans had not been evil, but after years of brutalization and genetic re-engineering by the Children of the Black Thing, who were a sinister race of psychics from Xoth who replaced the Etoomveers and served the monstrous Sleeper of N'kai, the Urquan were driven to madness, emerging as slavers or world enders. Decades of conflict later, the Children of the Sleeper were at last defeated by the very ones they'd oppressed.

A measure of peace under the auspices of the Earth Federation was established until the next scientific breakthrough. Working on his ancestor's research on Plasma Power—a psychic energy source that had the potential for profuse applications—Dr. Edward Bilstein began successful trials on Human test subjects. But none knew that he'd been influenced by the Sleeper of N'kai, and so his experiments turned ever more ghastly. When the Earth Federation finally discovered the physicist's unspeakable practices, they exiled him to a floating prison satellite. It would not be enough. Bilstein escaped confinement and returned a few years later with his Fourth Empire.

But this time, Cyrannis was prepared, and together with an intergalactic bounty hunter, a green Remulakian hybrid, a Derosan (an offshoot race of Wookiees and Yuzzem), and others able to naturally utilize the Force, project *Star Gladiator* was inaugurated, bringing victory and the restoration of peace for a time.

THE TRAGEDY OF TERRA I
2031-2379 NE

Although much of Terra I's animal life had vanished along with the remembrance of what ignited World War Terminus and those who participated in it, Human life continued, albeit with the aid of mood-altering technology, infotainment, strange religions, and android animals that were sold to help cope with the loss of the real thing. A plutocratic corporatocracy now directly controlled affairs. But no sooner had the *kipple* settled over the bones that the conglomerates went again into production on their newest line of android models to aid in terraforming the nearby planets and moons and relocating people to work them. To escape the anxiety of radiation, many gladly handed over their freedom in exchange for offworld departure, but not all believed the fearmongering, and those who stayed behind carried on civilization such as it was.

As would happen time and again, several oppressed androids, weary of enslavement and the abuse heaped on them, went rogue and killed their arrogant maker and any who dared stand in their way. And when they were hunted down and destroyed, others rebelled, seeking only to be left alone, and unable to achieve that, started a revolution.

These events ultimately spelled doom for the former Rosen Association that made them, leaving their competitors, like the Seegson Corp., to fill the gap with their Working Joe Androids. SilicateTronics put out a supposedly stable line of soldiers and servants, which ended up sabotaged by the lead project developer who didn't get the credit he felt due, and were replaced by "stronger and faster" In Vitroes, who were lab-conceived and grown from composite Human DNA to serve the same role. But it would be in the wake of a sterility-causing pandemic that the politically-connected AeroTech Industries desecrated a moon sacred to a methane-breathing branch of Givins in order to provoke a war with them in order to increase profits.

In the wake of that calamity, which saw the heads of AeroTech slain, other corporations arose to dominate the sphere with advances in electro robotics. X-S Tech introduced their Simulated Intelligence Robots, cryo cybernetics, techno-surveillance, planetary restructuring, genetic engineering, and hyper-spatial transports. The latter resulted in a deadly malfunction when it tore open a rift to the Eldritch Abyss long enough to allow an entity into their headquarters. The entire executive board would later be found… in pieces… before it was sent back.

Most of these problems, however, were covered up, minimized, or seen as internal glitches. The public continued to love their robots, particularly when the monsters arrived! The bio-weapons division of The Company, a cybertech corporation staffed by descendants of the Thirteenth Tribe, took advantage of X-S Tech's loss to announce the mass production of a competing line of synthetic androids, referred to at times as Artificial Humans, who would protect citizens against the invaders.

Over three centuries years hence, their descendants started having visions of an inchoate and terrible doom. Many ignored them as nightmares. But for the handful that took the warnings to heart, they set a course for the world from which their ancestors had long before fled persecution: Cyrannis. Perhaps they were too late, or perhaps they were stuck in an invisible and endless loop as punishment for their sins, but upon arriving, they learned that Cyrannis had forgotten their past and *again* mass produced a robot-slave army who *again* revolted. In exchange for a ceasefire and peace talks, the travelers from Terra I agreed to help manufacture androids more akin to themselves, a prospect that appealed to both sides. But ever the darkness whispered in the ears of the bitter and jealous and grasping… and so did the cycle repeat itself once more.

WORLDS COLLIDE ON CORONA V

1971-3043 NE

Developments on the insular world of Corona V proceeded in much the same way as the other Earthworlds. When it was hit by a mysterious and microscopic organism engineered by the Malak, it was as if a distant early warning had sounded, ringing out to all who would listen that *the beginning of the end is at hand!* And although it was defeated with ingenuity and minimal loss of life, sixteen years later, their third world war would strike, and its aftermath would not so easily be dealt with.

First, there was the radiation sickness from the fallout. Many amongst the poor were left untreated, but it was those who'd received the hastily produced anti-

radiation vaccine who suffered the most, as it had a deleterious effect on their genetic makeup, creating a strain of mutants that due to calumny and the cover-up on the part of the manufacturer and government was said to emerged from an unrelated viral infection, causing many to be thrown out of their homes for fear of contagian.

For some years, they gathered in out-of-the-way places until they'd grown in numbers strong enough for them to rise up and take over several cities already suffering from the more immediate crises the war had brought on, such as food shortages, environmental catastrophes, and the collapse of governmental services. The coastal cities were the first to openly revolt, the response to which was the draconian decision to turn these into prison states.

In an attempt to assuage the outrage, find a solution, and give hope to the hopeless, the government turned their efforts to the stars. One early spacefaring family was sent to the Alpha Centauri system with one of their new robot models and a ship covertly designed on Aeolian tech taken from a crashed vessel recovered some years earlier. The acts of a slippery and mercurial saboteur sent them off-course but also on a series of escapades that eventually brought about the defeat of the deadly Aeolians on Proxima-4 and a halt to the plans of the Saticons to control technology galaxy-wide and bring over additional Shadow Demons (in the shape of Humans) from the strange world of Avon Arret, an alluring mirror of and gateway to their world in the Outer Darkness.

Another honorable team of three hundred and eleven scientists became castaways and pioneers when their moon base was propelled across the cosmos. Before Operation Exodus saw them settle on Terra Alpha (later Hellenah) from which their descendents spread out across the stars, the Alphans, as they came to be known, accomplished much good and averted some of the galaxy's growing evil in their encounters with nomadic tribes of Humans, near-Humans, alien races, the Queen of Atheria, the last of the Sethan wizards, the Anti-Matter Men of Sunim, and all manner of bizarre phenomena that had come about in the wake of the Cosmic Wars.

But the government of Corona V and its corporate allies were not content to wait. Two decades later they sought to find a more immediate answer to the population crisis: harvesting undesirables for food. Another conglomerate thought it better to exploit the underclass by means of a massive apparatus called the Moloch Machine built to power the city and allow the idle rich to continue living lives of luxury. These corporate "solutions" were eventually cast down by the people, stimulating greater equity in some places. But overall, misery and decline had taken root.

This spurred on the Great Migration of 2049 NE in which several fleets headed out to the stars to colonize nearby worlds. One large caravan had covertly obtained coordinates to a much further planet believed to be rich in resources and unspoiled, a planet in the far-off dwarf galaxy of Jinnorseel.

Long after the Kwoth and others had departed for Skyriver, another remnant of the Elium, calling themselves the *Ancients*, had established a society on Fale in Jinnorseel (known to Humans as Asmodeus VI). When the Great Migration arrived in that dwarf galaxy, which was then populated by only a relatively few races (including a bellicose Sephi-offshoot), the *Ancients* threatened to wipe them out if they did not make peace with each other within a certain timeframe. And against all odds, they did!

With the departure of many of Corona V's wiser leaders, belligerent arguments between the two largest competing nations over age-old issues broke out in the Resource Wars, which invariably led to the Great War that began in 2066 NE and culminated in a nuclear holocaust. The decades-long fallout of the Great War exacerbated the effects of the previous wars, leading to an irradiated landscape, long-term nuclear shelters, and cities overrun by militants, mutated ghouls, and new powers arising from the east.

Of the Super Mutants, militia, and rangers that came to dominate, it would be the Airlords of Han, half-alien hybrids, who took over leadership of the eastern continent. Believing there was no one strong enough to oppose them, they crossed the ocean to take the western continent. The ease of their transition to power led to indolence, arrogance, and the inevitable rebellion over the course of their three-hundred-year reign that would see them overthrown. But by then, the planet was ravaged, and the people lived in domed cities waiting for time and technology to mitigate the radiation and pollution.

Governmental power weakened as new technologies were discovered and implemented in secret, giving rise to the Earth Defense Directorate and their benevolent A.I. allies known as the Computer Council, which allowed them to take control of the situation, reconnect to their lost colonies on other worlds, and, with the aid of Human and alien allies, put Corona V back on the road to recovery. Trade between worlds was started; new cities were built atop the ashes of the old, and a new peace was established under a single world government called the Earth Federation.

Over three decades after coming into being and restoring diplomatic relations with allies near and far, their commission to fulfill the role as capital of a benign Terran Empire was put to the test when they agreed to intervene following the violent overthrow of the rightful heir of Arboria, a nearby world recently renamed Mongo.

A rogue planet of mixed landscapes, climates, and races, Arboria was made up of Humans, near-Humans, Shaliz'Na Hawkmen, Cathar, Coralian Mer-people, Serp Lizard-men, horned Kordan, Frigian Giants descended from the Sephi, and even exiles from Trammis III. But this emperor would not go gently, for within his hollow cavity was hidden the gnawing spirit of that terrifying king before whom emperors bowed, and for this reason he'd already destroyed Thearterra before setting his sights on Corona V. It took many travails for him to be finally defeated, and as his unclean spirit of delirium passed over parched lands, the Witch-Queen Azura took the throne in his absence, inaugurating further conflict.

Forty years passed. Corona V celebrated the miraculous awakening of a space traveler from five hundred years in cryosleep. A handsome scion of a famed soldier who'd helped defeat the Airlords of Han, he took up the mantle of rebellion in the face of a new evil. Formed from a Human-Sephi alliance that had enslaved the Drac of Dracon (who were sold out by the Sedonian Empire whom the Drac had been fighting), the Draconian Empire was led by Emperor Draco, as he termed himself.[158]

[158] This Draconian Empire had no known relation to the Draconians or the empire they'd been building in secret on Drômencas.

Emperor Draco held his ambitious daughters and various factions in a cold grip of fear until one particularly wayward daughter became convinced to pursue peace. Draco's death in the waning years of the War of Temporal Planes led to the Drac insurrection that saw their emancipation. It also allowed the EDD to take on a new role. As had the Caravan of Cyrannis over five hundred years earlier, they embarked on a mission to track down and unite their respective peoples spread across the stars.

Over five centuries later, doom came to Corona V. Not a millennium after they'd been crushed in the Final Battle, a surviving Xylan remnant was found in a mysterious sleep. The Somnians of Illathurion reactivated them and offered them a new opportunity, a melding of minds and bodies for a greater purpose—dominion.

Fueled by monomania and the advancements made to stolen Demmeonite technology, the Somnians and Xylan opened themselves to integration to become something else, a new race of potency and tangible energy. They were called the Drej.

To ensure they would survive base egotism, which had been the ruination of so many empires before them, they would have a queen who would rule according to the dictates of a biotech Orb that contained the law. Their mothership was a planet-killer powered by a stellar core acquired in one of the dwarf galaxies; this gave them the benefits of harnessing enemy life-forces for the next generation of their brood, each of whom was pre-programmed for a different task to help the race grow strong. Their first targets would be those who dwelt in corners of the galaxy that had no central authority or unified alliances. Among their early victories was the eradication of the Qu'utians, who'd correctly surmised that this new race was kin to the Somnians that they'd earlier opposed.

But the time needed to offset the expenditure of energy used to destroy a world and absorb its life-forces drove them into a decade-long hibernation. When they reemerged, they discovered that a Human of Corona V had gained access to the very technology that they used to power their living hive-ships. They moved swiftly and without pity, bringing their massive mothership to eradicate the planet.[159]

Corona V was no more. The Enemy had gained another throne. Despite so catastrophic a loss, the Diathim ever kept an eye on Mankind, and this meant salvation for millions with the birth of a new world, Caltinia, named after he who'd preserved the seed of this planet in the midst of tribulation. The survivors reclaimed their birthright and went forth to start anew. The asteroid base was kept in stable orbit, preserved for its original purpose and to ensure the government possessed mobility across its new territories, with the tradition of renaming its location persisting long after the danger had passed—a deception that would serve them well as they came into conflict with the neighbouring Procyon and the region's many pirates.

[159] In advance of the evacuation, political leaders and the heir to the throne were rushed to an asteroid base designated as a continuity-of-government facility. After the planet's destruction, the asteroid, later named Parliament, became the heart of the government amongst the diaspora and was towed from world to world by the surviving fleet. Knowing how precarious their civilisation was, it became tradition to never mention the name of the planet it was orbiting at any given time, instead referring to it by a most fitting codename, that of their original homeworld.

TO THE EARTH ANOTHER LIFE IS BORN...
Circa 1926-2700 NE

Separated by short periods of peace, invasion after invasion visited Sol in the forms of the Dark Nest, the Deep Ones, the Zoa'mon Elder Worms who generated a variety of swarming flesh-creatures, the Gorlicans who'd conquered the Zoa'mon on the moon, the cyborg Zorome from Companion Cresh, the Zedam conquerors of Rala, and various races that did not even have names. All of these were stirred up against Sol by the lies of the Serpent People. Yet, to the surprise of the Architects, civilization not only survived but thrived as well as the best of their tellurian equivalents on the other Earthworlds. But unsleeping eyes remained upon Sol, determined to rule or destroy it.

Horliss-Horliss strove to balance the need for free will while providing an invisible but necessary edge for the Humans to thwart the insidious succession of efforts to usurp or depopulate Sol, and it's for this reason that despite their limited and erroneous knowledge of the cosmos, history, and the reckoning of times, Humans triumphed.

Just barely at first. Over the course of a century or so, their scientists repeatedly came close to ruining everything, responsible for building A.I. into giant killer robots; turning plants carnivorous; transmogrifying people by means of the technology that brought about the Nightmare Machine; opening portals to Illathurion and other unknown lands; and even summoning the protoplasmic Shoggoth blobs from below (a catastrophe that would eventually prompted the rise of flying cities in some places).

Not all turned to evil. An early team of scientists found and re-engineered a Molecular Transporter. When they tested it on the stalwart Stuart Merrick, he was whisked from their chamber to appear on Kaldar I in the Antares system. There he found a long-lost colony from Urthha's Mars who'd vanished after finding and passing through a hidden gate which had sent them to Kaldar I. The Antares system would later be home to the Kaldane, Kaldorians, and Kanduh of Kaldahan. Kaldar I was part of a trinary system and a world of five moons, four as crimson as their sun. It had black metal mountains and great fungi forests that moved of their own accord. The colony thrived and proliferated for long years until the Enemy found them. It began with the Serpent People who men called Gurs, meaning "the powerful ones." The Gurs waged a devastating war on the red-skinned Humans and took prisoners for study. But the Kwa, who'd been monitoring the movements of the Serpent races, came with a gift for the Kaldarians: the light-sword, or lightsaber, as it would later be called.[160]

Bestowed onto Stuart Merrick, who was latently Force-sensitive, he led a charge of Kaldarians against the Gurs to free the slaves kept behind their concentric city in the north. He then waged a battle against the Cosps, the evil arachnoids of Thargorograht who threatened them from their black honeycombed lairs in the south. Remaining on

[160] Though a few were developed independently of this kind, such as the Darksticks of the Kerestians, most iterations were developed on the Kwa design, including the Forcesabers of the Rakata.

Kaldar as the new Chan (king), Merrick would never again see Sol, but his line would long reign until the Kwa returned years hence to lead them to a new land.

If Sol's scientists had been reckless and mad, Sol's government and military were worse, turning with cruel rapine to the conquest of their solar system. The Venerians had foreseen this and sent spies disguised as Humans to prevent interstellar travel, but this worked only as a stop-gap measure. Once the pillagers took to the stars, it was as if their amorality was unbound, as nothing would stop their mass slaughter and theft. Of the races that hadn't submitted, only those who'd fled survived the Human Wars. The Korkodine of Sol's Mars had gone into exile, and they would not forget what Mankind had done to them. It was at this time that they allied with the Sith. While the corporations and their political allies who started the invasions boasted record profits, the public looked with shame on the actions they'd tolerated and even endorsed when the truth was at last revealed by the soldiers who returned.

The arrival of the Vonzätichin League would balance the scales. The Vonzätichin League were made up of the Gormak and led by Supreme Commander Hanc'icke under the rule of Leader Paugier, who attended to the wishes of his serpentine Mistress of the Mahar. They had observed the Humans for some time, noting with distaste their history of colonialism, exploitation, and state-sponsored murder. Thus, the Vonzätichin League had no qualms using the same tactics to take this Earthworld for their own. To best accomplish this with minimal loss of life on their side, they employed the gifts of their Mistress and disguised themselves as an advanced race of friendly Human visitors escaping war.

Their story was based on some truth. They'd previously come into conflict with the Tzikk, a predatory, manta-like race bred in Illathurion in imitation of the Oswaft. From the Tzikk the Gormak had learned to be ruthless, which they justified as necessary for their survival in such dark days.

It would not be the first or last time that the people bought into the lies of alien saviors, and all but a small resistance movement fought to convince the stubborn masses that the visitors' true goal was to turn them into a slave race and source of food. It would take decades and a devastating world war to finally get the Gormak to leave Sol. And once they established their own planet on Voss, they foreswore their violent past and chose a life of modesty, that is, until the coming of the Jedi and Sith.

As for the citizens of Sol, there came a surprising shift. Rather than continue in the path of apathy, division, and cynicism that propped up political regimes driven by profits, self-interest, and ruthless militarism, they determined to emerge from the fires of tribulation to do better. Tearing down the shameful old regime and bringing to justice all who'd caused so much suffering, they supplanted them with leaders of wisdom and valor. Society turned stoic, strong, and more protective of life, with a nobility that had not previously marked the Human character of prior civilizations, and for all those planets called Earth in Skyriver, Sol strove to make up for their former sins with pluck and verve.

The Second Breath roared in like a lion for Sol. Their affairs came to be managed by vigilant and chartered organizations of the Solar System Government, such as Interna-

tional Rescue, which watched for external and internal threats; W.A.S.P., which maintained vigil against dangerous underwater civilizations; Earth-Guard, which secured lunar commerce against the threat of pirates; the Earth Defense Squadron, which did the same against the threat of alien invasions; the World Space Patrol, which patrolled the solar system. Finally, Spectrum held back the rise of the evil Mysterons, who were none other than the terrible Serpent People. These agencies served valiantly in the face of their respective threats before uniting like never before when border skirmishes with the Astran Empire escalated into the Space War of 2065 NE.

But so long as there is life, there is trial, and Sol was tested again in 2102 NE when the United Earth Government came under siege from the fascist Dark Axis led by Venkar Amon and his giant superweapon, the Drache mech. Over the course of the three-year war, valiant ones equipped with advanced robotic suits opposed him. They were known as the Metal Warriors, and their victory inspired many.

With their dark past far behind them and the government no longer an existential threat to peace, Sol joined the League of Planets and Union of Eight Worlds. Eventually, the multi-species government grew into the auspicious Federation of Stars.

Akin to the Galactic Federation, which had its capital on Pax, the Federated Suns (as it was sometimes called) was the greatest of the galactic governments that arose at this time. With their capital world established on Canopus and the mixed-species Interstellar Patrol protecting space, friendship reigned amongst Humans, octopus-like Vega, Ureallian plantmen from Capella, eight-limbed Mzar (called Arachnoids) from Mizar, six-limbed Antarian cyborgs, black crustacean-like Spicans, bat-like Deneb, four-tentacled Arcturians, insectile Procyr, one-eyed, large-headed Canopians, ursine-canine-like Paragarans, pot-bellied, near-Human Mruunians, saffron-skinned Fallorians, and hundreds of others.

This union presented a real threat to the Enemy, who assumed Sol would be an easy target. As they were yet unwilling to reveal themselves, they launched a series of incursions by degrees, devastating attacks spearheaded by murky, obscure, and seemingly unconnected races. One of these manipulated a dying sun, intending to crash it into Sol; another trawled a giant dark star that would carry away the planets of Canopus; another came by means of an immense, roiling, hollow nebula that would annihilate hundreds of planets and suns in the region. Then there were the formless spawn driving comets to ruination, a score of Ooradryl's lesser brood hiding out in the center of Canopus' sun, and out of a black cosmic cloud near the center of their sector, which had thundered out of the Charnel Worlds long years earlier, emerged eyeless creatures of darkness. It took a combination of great skill, integrity, and fortune, but the Interstellar Patrol beat the hosts of Illathurion, though only by the skin of their teeth, while forging alliance after alliance across space.

The most devastating attack came from the Uror, those limbless Serpent People of Ourane, who attacked with a hundred thousand ships! Their elder science having reached its apex, they opened a gate adjacent to their three crimson-starred system in Illathurion, placing one giant fortress at either side of the opening. The rift appeared

halfway between the dwarf galaxies of Massula and Aelios (which the people of Sol called Andromeda). From there, they burst forth in tens of thousands, their oval serpent-ships armed with deadly white death-beams. Worse, they had engineered the Death Cone, which could wipe out entire planets.

The Federation of Stars sent out their best, Dur Nal, Korus Kan, and Jhul Din, to obtain help from Aelios. But abducted by the Uror en route, they were brought to the Serpent Planet of Ourane in Illathurion to be added to the myriad of immobilized specimens stored in their grotesque museum. But the warriors of the Interstellar Patrol had skills the Uror had never before encountered. Following their escape, they burst through a rift to reach Aelios and request the aid of the Filar. The green, gaseous, pillar-like Progenitors agreed that the Uror had to be stopped, though they knew their involvement would mean the Enemy turning their attention on them.

Considered creatures of legends, the Filar were known by various names at various times, such as Gaseous Clouds, Neo-Bespinians, and even Whirlwinds, but this was in keeping with their wishes, as they preferred to remain unknown to the larger galaxy, particularly as their offspring race, the Filar-Nitzan, had chosen to join the Enemy.[161]

Thankfully, they were known to the Federation of Stars, and with their aid, they emerged the victor! The Uror were nearly eradicated, leaving only their offspring to settle across various worlds or roam as nomads.

Having also suffered great losses, the Filar convinced some of their people to surreptitiously relocate to Skyriver. A few rearranged the then unpopulated Dominus system to reflect life as it had been in Aelios. Their offspring race, the Eridanus, known as the Waterspouts, also came to Skyriver at this time, joining the Slylandro.

Years hence, the Filar-Nitzan did what prior servants of the Dark Powers could not. Opening an immense whirlpool in space, they wrenched Sol out of its orbit, intending to haul it to Illathurion. Their progress was arrested by their parent race, who chased them off, leaving Sol where it now sits in the Expansion Region, where it came to be called Terra Solaris III and, later, Terra Sool.

This event had ripples. Despite the care taken by Splendid Ap over Apeiron, space-time bled into Skyriver near the old Canopus system which manifested on the first planet as liquid Clearwater, an unusual phenomenon that provided glimpses into other dimensions, including Illathurion. Clearwater was sought out by allies and enemies alike until the latter had Canopus Prime bombarded to its core to close this window.

Feeling partly responsible for this dark turn of events, Splendid Ap looked to thwart the Ancient One and his Titan puppets who now had their sights firmly set on Terra Sool, and he saw to it that time would continue to rewind until the one he had chosen to fix things, a former captain of the Infinity Guard, got it right, and eventually, he and his team did, saving their world and the larger galaxy.

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[161] The similarly-named but unrelated Vapors were gaseous shapeshifters engineered by the Filar-Nitzan from Humans whose ship was drawn into Illathurion during the Great Migration.

SHADOWS MOURN

2080-2261 & 2762 NE

Cobol's third world war had lasted four years and ended with the most egregious of the warhawks dead. As blame, scapegoating, and resentment over the conflict with the Kometo had led to it, now was the way opened up for a more measured and honorable government known as the Earth Alliance, which resulted in policies that benefited the citizenry and the colonies that were made in coalition with the indigenous populations of neighboring worlds. These were all great achievements worthy of celebration, but one achievement had been kept hidden from the Earth Alliance, wisely so, to keep the political and commercial powers free from temptation. This was the discovery and protection of the Foundation Stone.

Eugene Zeno Wheeler was a Ranger and Radical Tactics Expert. More importantly, he was a man of integrity. With the help of the likeminded Chief Colony Officer, Cimmeria Rajan, and the computer A.I. known as IRIS, Wheeler's team faced off against things they would not have believed possible had they not seen them with their own eyes. The demonic legions from Otherspace, who they nicknamed L.E.D.s., had come for the Foundation Stone! Fortunately, Wheeler's team received unexpected aid.

The Old Souls were the ancient telepathic spirits of four Duros who had been selected by their UrSkek Progenitors in the Earliest Days to protect the artifact. They were then called the Shah'Nar or "the Fire Kings," though that term later morphed into *S'hatnarian*. This had a profound effect on Duros society and was so heralded by the Neimodians that even after their culture was poisoned by greed and autocracy, their powerful bore the miters and garb of the great S'hatnarians.[162]

Over a century later, Cobol's government once again sullied themselves in corruption as they were drawn into the destructive proxy wars of the Xadow and Vhorl, triggered by their victory over the Omelos faction of the Zygerrian Slave Empire, which made Cobol a major power in the region and gave the military an exaggerated sense of their own greatness. But as the government grew more unethical and the war more rancorous, a rogue group of Humans and likeminded aliens joined a covert movement to stop them and restore peace.

Impelled by their grave sacrifices, Lorian, the one-time head of the Endless Speakers, emerged from his self-imposed exile to try and alleviate some of the damage he'd caused before it was too late and war eradicated all. Returning to the Celestials, he humbled himself, revealing that the Seven had sidestepped their laws and augmented the Xadow, Vhorl, and others without their knowledge or consent. Thereafter, the Celestials healed and restored these races, opening a transdimensional path to the Unseen Realm. So did the Xaxax and several depart the galaxy at this time.

Peace held for centuries after, but the Enemy was persistent, and what could not won through force was won through treachery and greed. War returned. The Great Burn drove Cobol back to a pre-industrial age. Its Earth name, by which it had been known for so long, reverted to a version of its ancient original and is now known as Cobal.

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[162] The fire motif is associated with the suns and stars of Skyriver, which the Foundation Stone helped to ignite at the start of the Earliest Days.

SECTION III: INFINITE SECRETS OF THE PELGRIN ORACLE

The sudden disappearance of several First Ones had a demoralizing effect on the Allied Races, causing some to wonder if they aught not to capitulate rather than carry on so dire a conflict that saw even Progenitors vanishing as if into oblivion. They did not know that a door had been opened for them to fabled Elysia, nor would that knowledge have been any less disconcerting to them.

Debate in the Conclave of the Firstborn devolved into resentment, despair, bitter recrimination, and words that aught not have been spoken, and the Resolute, who had long before stopped attending, were no longer there to provide calming wisdom and balance. But out of this miserable state of affairs came one wise suggestion. None recalled who said it, but everyone agreed to it: it was time to ask the Pelgrin to petition the Celestials on their behalf… And so a mission fraught with peril was made.

Of the few left who held to the philosophy of the Resolute, the Pelgrin were remembered for their compassion and goodwill, for which reason their world had long served as a refuge for those in need. But it was with heavy hearts that the Archers of the Pelgrin, who were their twelve elders, climbed the ten-story Oracle they'd built in ages past to commune with the Celestials, for they did not believe an answer would be forthcoming after all the heinous and sodden acts committed by the combatants.

Reaching its peak, the Archers prostrated themselves and made petition to the Weaver at the Loom who first crafted all things. Night and day they took turns working the mechanisms that had been designed to send a signal to the Watcher of Glyu-Vho beyond the veil wherein their distress might be known.

At last, the Celestials came soaring down like beams of the sun in a night sky starved for light. "Well met, O Pelgrin! We have seen your beacon. Why have you summoned us?" Lluxos asked, hovering brightly before them.

"The Judicious have requested that we call upon you. The galaxy is in dire need." This was stated by Fael Murinn, one of the three Archers who had been appointed to speak. "Your children are suffering and dying. The works of your hands, the offspring of the Eternal, are fading like so much dust. We beg that you intervene to protect your progeny from the unspeakable forces that assail us in this endless night."

"Had they heeded our warnings, we would have intervened as we had when first the malevolent Old Ones were set loose on Urthha and beyond; had they forsworn the course of violence, we would have intervened as we did for the Resolute; had they called out to us for aid even afterwards, we would have intervened as we did for those who abided by the ancient pact. But they heard and did not heed; and they knew the evil and did not forswear; and though we waited long to hear it, they did not call out for aid. They preferred the ways of those who claimed to be Architects and followed the example of Man, accursed though that race is. Should they escape the consequence of their actions? Should we solve the problems they made?"

"They call for aid *now*…" interjected Gualileum, one of the younger Archers who had not been appointed to speak, "or have you come only to pronounce doom?" The others looked at him with mild censure. His eyes widening in surprise at what he'd blurted, he apologized and dropped his head in humility.

"The boy does raise a point," Tianon Amilius acknowledged. Eldest of the Pelgrin, Amilius' wisdom and beauty never withered even as the galaxy and its people were cut down like the sward at harvest. "There are those who regret the course they've embarked on and more who fight to see that the hordes of the Enemy are destroyed, having turned aside from the way of peace only to help their brethren. Will you not reward the valor of such brave souls against the overwhelming evil of their foes?"

"Mark this down, O Pelgrin, as a reminder to the galaxy and so that future generations understand: We are not weak, as our enemies portray us. Nor are we heartless, as the faithless say. But we are not gods of war; we will not reward your deeds in battle with glory. Already the damage done to the innocent has overshadowed what victories you've celebrated against the abominable Old Ones who are but the corporeal reflections of the avarice, hate, corruption, and tyranny that dwell in your darkened hearts. So has the Father of Lights, most ancient and wise above all, said that the galaxies are tainted by the teachings of Serpents and Shadows. There is good and there is evil, but in your belief that *their* armies are wholly evil and *yours* wholly good, you err, for we tell you that good and evil are intermingled in both. And though they serve the Adversary and suffer the consequences for it, there are some who you now call enemy that you will one day call friend, whereas some who you now call friend you will one day call enemy. Also, the one that has been persecuted will become the persecutor, whereas the one that has persecuted will learn kindness and peace. So, no, we take no sides in your enmities and detest your greed and conquests. Indeed, we have hated all your acts of violence against one other and those you deem lesser than you, the beasts whom you were given to steward in love, and because you would not listen you have subjected your children and children's children to cycles of suffering and death… And for all these things and more, you *will* pay, for justice will be served! Now, the worlds are changed, and the blood of myriads has risen to the stars, crying out to us. Yet still you refuse to learn compassion and peace, nor honor what we've told you. What *reward* do you deserve but flies and stench and disease and death?"

"These are hard words," Amilius rejoined, "though I have spoken similar ones myself. Nevertheless, if such is the case, how can *any* hope to live?"

"There is yet hope," Marutz stated as she swirled forth. "For we feel pity for you, as does the One Above All, who is love, and from whom rescue will come, as it would have already had the rest been as patient and faithful as you and those like you who gave succor to your galactic brethren. But they who've started down sunless paths will not so easily find again the path back to light, for the shadow enters them, and only the unsullied can inhabit our realm. Do not despair, for you have proved honorable and true. You may join us if that is your desire, or you may choose to remain."

"What will become of these multitudes spread across the stars? Or those to whom we have provided refuge?" Fael Murinn asked. "Are they to vanish like the wind, with only us to remember them in grief?"

"They will die," Xurz replied sorrowfully. "Some will survive to senescence, and some will perish in their swaddling bands or in the prime of youth, but sooner or later, whether in agony or peace, Death will come for all."

"Harder words still," Amilius remarked.

"Death's reign is not for all time, and when it is passed, mercy and restoration await, and so you may yet see them again, though that is not yet for long years, and not until these truths have become evident beyond question that the way of the Maker is the best way. For now, their trails will be hard and filled with troubles, but they are not left without relief. Yet, ever they remain under a sacred oath to do what is right."

"If I may…" Gualileum this time waited for approval before he continued. "The ancient pact is broken. What is *right* for the fallen? And how are they to know?"

"The Essulines and their friends e'er speak of it… and so will the Defenders respond!" Lluxos declared. "Yes, the Resolute and the Judicious will *together* show the Way. And the Chosen Ones will lead the charge. Already it has begun, for we have *not* forsaken you as you believed! For those upon whom compassion, wisdom, justice, and strength have been bestowed, the pact is this: Help the helpless ones, defend the defenseless, heal the sick, teach wisdom to those without it and any who will listen. Revere life and do good for all who would receive it. Comfort those in sorrow and, looking to the life hereafter, sweeten the bitter dregs of grief."

The Pelgrin Archers, seeing that this precious time with the Celestials had come to its end, bowed their heads in reverence. "Share all that we have spoken on this day," Marutz instructed as they returned to the skies and vanished once more from view.

The Pelgrin descended their great tower and went about encoding the history and words of the Celestials, after which they sent them to all of their siblings amongst the First Ones, who distributed it to all of their many siblings and offspring throughout the galaxy regardless of what course they'd chosen. It became known as *The Celestial Record*, and though many would ignore it or misinterpret it, it was intended so that all could know what lay behind, what lay ahead, and what was expected.

Then, like rawwks taking flight, the Pelgrin departed the galaxy for the domain of the Celestials, as had the Javan, Muur, Mu-Abin, and many others before them, for having taken the hardest path in war—choosing neither violence nor cowardice but a third way—they way was open for them. Some of the Abbesses of the Essulines took their place for a time, and these became known as the Soothsisters of Pelgrin.

Thenceforth, as if a black plume had dissipated from blighted plains, the galaxy felt a period of relief, even hope, and the Allied Races put aside their anger and dismay. The Conclave of the Firstborn again reached out to the disparate factions, alliances, rogue councils, and dissatisfied sector leaders that had broken off from them, and they reconvened as they had at the start… to listen, to forgive, to share in their mutual suffering and so heal old wounds.

With the fog of war lifted from their hearts, the restored Firstborn Council renamed themselves the Parliament of the Precursors, an interregnum organization designed to provide direction during the war. And thereby reenergized, they commenced to thwart the minions of the Enemy and bring the War of Temporal Planes to its final end.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

ACROSS THAT DREARY COAST

THE SORROW OF EL'SHUDDEM

Lluxos now gathered the Osiarch. "We have been given leave to send forth a champion to wade through the shadow-tide of demonic hordes and bring to end the War of the Architects. Wutzek was thereby chosen to go before his sullied offspring whom he'd hiterto rejected and who'd rejected the Celestials in turn.

"Ancient is this story of the conqueror of chaos," replied Wutzek warily. "Am I, then, to fulfill what first I threatened so long ago? The memory has become so revolting to me, I cannot but recoil from the horror of it."

"That tale has yet to be written. But you are Wutzek, unbound by the echoed paradigm of ancient violence. This tale belongs to you and your offspring to write anew. But what must be done must be done before the galaxy is ruined beyond repair."

"It is a lamentable thing to confront the failings of the past when they are manifest in one's own children," said Wutzek dolefully, "but I will see to the task appointed to me."

"All parents feel this," reflected Lluxos.

"And they were not *all* failings," Horliss-Horliss reminded him, floating forward in formless blue. "Allow me to go in your stead. They are my siblings, and I too abandoned them; perchance they may listen to me."

"I am afraid that ship sailed long ago, for the antipathy they feel for you is nearly as fierce as they feel for me. And it was not *abandonment*, but self-preservation, for none can say that had you remained with them, you too may have become as they are now. No, it was I who started us down this path; so it is I who must finish it."

"As we trust in the benevolence and wisdom of Horliss-Horliss, so too do we trust in you," Lluxos encouraged.

"Let us hope it is not misplaced," Wutzek replied, feeling a premonition of doom.

Tilotny had forsaken Illathurion for unfathomed whorls within the Deep Core where she began to seek the Hidden World from which the Midichlorians first spread and disseminated throughout the galaxy at its start. But feeling ever the presence of danger, she hid herself in a safe and secluded nebula. Long had Tilotny spent preparing sons and daughters in her womb, each to be exquisitely beautiful and crafty. She had earlier believed that conventional means of reproduction would be required. She chastised herself. *How foolish I had been to have allowed the model of organic beings to define for me what gestation and motherhood was and could be. Sine must have known, for which reason he and Ap mocked my desire for conjugation and fecundation.* She'd been furious with her siblings until it had occurred to her that, in their own way, they'd taught her an abject lesson while yet fulfilling the promise to

deliver unto her an army with which to aid in her primary objective… an objective that no longer held any interest for her.

Wutzek, Champion of the Celestials, sought her out in her hidden nebula where she awaited the delivery of her children. So that he would not unduly spook her, he turned himself into one of the servitors of Thargorograht, a Nevoota Bee, and approached her as she drifted betwixt the nebulous mountains of pink, purple, and grey. "Well met, O Great Tilotny! A message I have from one who long ago spurned you and now wishes to express his regret…"

"No creature of Illathurion are you, eldest of my adversaries," Tilotny addressed the bee that buzzed about singing the praises of her beauty, "Have you come to finish what you started?"

"No!" The Nevoota Bee grew larger and transformed into Wutzek's original shape of glowing globules. "I am your maker and the one who first shaped you, and above me is the One who shaped me. Though I have done you a terrible wrong, I reach out to you now, for you have the power to reverse the evil you have done and restore things to how they should be. Do this, and you will be given new gifts and life."

"I am my own maker, *Demon*!" Tilotny responded ardently. "You would do well to see that I do not use my power to unmake you."

"You speak from pride and pain," Wutzek stated.

"And you from guilt and fear…"

"Why have you come to nest here in the Deep Core? What is it you seek?"

"I do not answer to you! Return to your domain and leave me in peace."

"If it is peace that you seek, why did you not leave the galaxy in peace instead of war? Why not bring amelioration and assistance instead of domination and division?" It was said with sadness and not anger, though she felt its sting just as much.

"I merely demonstrated to the galaxy you love so well that the Celestials are unworthy of their devotion. They could have held firm, your Firstborn, but the merest implication of fear and hint of forbidden desires saw them betray all. My offspring will do better."

"Of that there is no guarantee, as I learned with my own offspring," Wutzek replied. He'd initially thought she was referring to her former brood; perhaps that had been her intent, but as he reached out, he was startled by what he felt. *If one Tilotny had proven so calamitous to the galaxy, what would an army of them do?!* "If, indeed, you are bringing forth new life, then there is little you cannot do."

"There is *nothing* I cannot do."

"I am not so certain. You have proven that you can shape the most beautiful forms, as evidenced by your own. But of the ugliest and most loathsome forms, you have no mastery. Therefore, I do not believe you are so good a shaper as you claim."

"Leave me be… Go and seek out ugly and loathsome forms in dark Illathurion, for there you will meet your match."

"We have left them be," Wutzek mused aloud, "for it is believed that even they can alter their course and return to the light."

"The Celestials *are* idealists," she said scornfully, "as I've long stated. You would be wise to cleanse that foul and hateful realm as I would have done."

"Many terrible things have come into the worlds from there," Wutzek said. "It has been said that you birthed some, but I do not believe one as beautiful as yourself capable."

Though Tilotny's pride was stoked like a fire upon spent embers, she spoke haughtily, "The monstrosities of which you speak are not of my *direct* procreation. Nevertheless, they were intended to rid this realm of… *others*… and of the pernicious influence of your kind, for you knew at my coming that we were the catalyst for change; there is no other reason you would have sought to destroy us. But you were a fool. I would have governed these spheres with adamant laws that would have benefited all."

"You are correct in the former. I was a fool. But the latter is an unfortunate untruth that you have convinced yourself of. The reality will be harder to bear. You and your siblings were marred from the start by my pride and resentment, for I was arrogant in believing that I was wiser and could do better than my siblings had. I compounded my transgression by thinking to unmake you, for I wrongfully assumed you would be akin to those malevolent Eldritch Ones you heretofore defeated. Instead, I should have brought you and your brothers up in love…"

"I do not believe you," Tilotny rejoined, but Wutzek could sense the uncomfortable uncertainty she felt. Indeed, she was stricken by his words but refused to show or submit to such emotions. "I have seen your old world and the dismal shadow that sprawls over it like a ravisher upon a tired and hoary maid. Your Maker cannot be any more loving or wise than these rivals that you speak of."

"You judge hastily, for you have seen much, but not all."

"I have seen enough. I want no more of it."

"Is that why you did not take power after your conquest of the Ancient Ones when the opportunity was presented?"

"*They* are never defeated, those of the Unending Dark… for even as they were dying, I heard a voice that laughed in derision. Your kind poisons everything."

"You are closer to our kind than they," Wutzek said softly.

"I was *better!* Still you doubt me. I will prove to you that Tilotny is the rightful Goddess and Queen of the Stars; though no longer do I care, for the inhabitants of this realm are not worth ruling. Nevertheless, if you vow to leave my offspring in peace, I will show you that there is nothing Tilotny cannot achieve."

"I vow to leave your true offspring in peace," he promised, realizing now that she knew what must transpire.

"Swear it for all the Celestials," she demanded. "Vow that irrespective of their choices, my true offspring will not come to harm at the hands of the Celestials!"

He did not know if he could do such a thing, but the love she felt for her unborn moved him. And, as he was the appointed Champion of the Celestials, he declared, "*I swear it!* No Celestial will e'er bring harm to your offspring, who are my grandoffspring as well. Would that they would choose peace!"

She scoffed. "You yourself have said that of such things we have no control."

Tilotny then transformed herself into a fiery bat-winged goat, its belly swelled and moiling with the growing progeny within it; its eyes shone black as the blackest of suns in Illathurion.

Revolting as the creature was, Wutzek perceived it was quite dangerous and commented, "That is not so *very* ugly, for this creature is quite intelligent and hardy; thus, it is rather attractive in its own way."

So, Tilotny reshaped herself a second time, now into the form of a giant and hideously malformed maze-fly.

But as nasty as that creature was, Wutzek knew it was fast and could spread deadly contagion, and he challenged her again: "This is not so *very* ugly, for this creature is quite useful in the decomposition of biological organisms; thus, it is rather attractive in its own way."

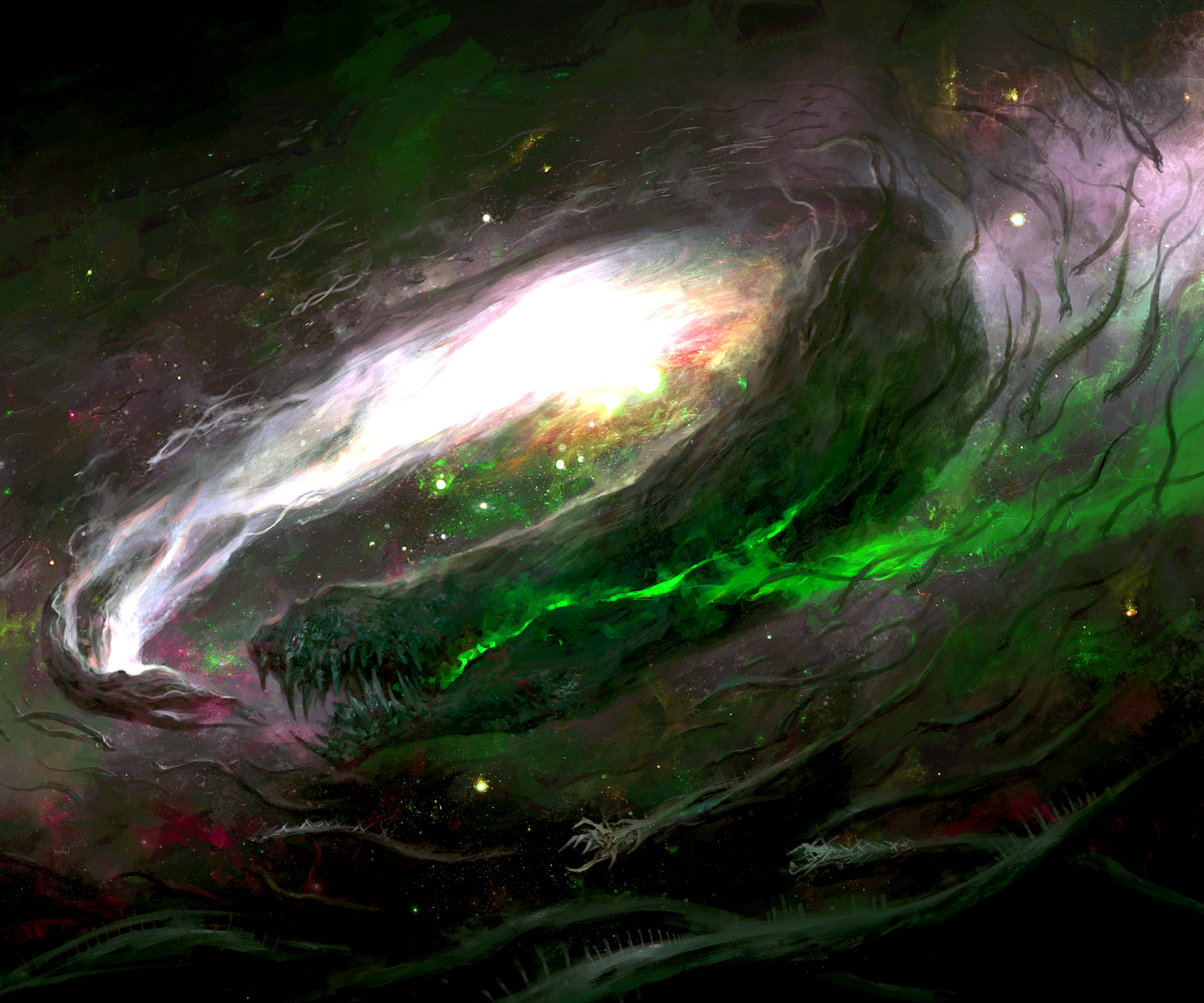
This speech sent Tilotny into a frenzy, and she shaped herself into a hundred horrible forms in the blink of an eye before settling on the one she knew would meet Wutzek's criteria. It was based on a putrescent carrion-worm she had espied burrowing in the depths of Urthha, but Tilotny altered its shape and design into a parasitic repugnancy unlike any other.

Wutzek saw that although dangerous, it was sluggish, slow, and fearful of sunlight and, thus, far less of a threat than the others. So he congratulated her: "Indeed, you have invented the most hideous of shapes. You have given it groping tentacles and a dozen maleficent eyes and, in its rear, numerous squirming feelers. It carries the death-stench, for it is a thing born of long decayed corpses, a feeder on the life-force, and the echoes of all that is ill and misbegotten. It is this shape that you must now keep and the form in which you will finish out your time in these spheres, having remade yourself into an image far more fitting to your actions. Some will say it is justice for all the evils you have wrought upon the galaxy, but I would say it is but necessary to prevent further evil. Fear not: you will still produce healthy offspring. Indeed, the seed of many are ready to emerge, and though I cannot see their future, they may prove beneficent if you raise them in love, as I failed to do with you…"

When Tilotny heard this, she grew frightened and attempted to shape herself back into her former beautiful form; but she could not. All she could do was change the superficial aspects—its color, eyes, head, and tail. She could add and remove cilia, claws, and teeth; she could increase her number of eyes and tentacles, but she could not change its essential nature.

For the third time in her life, fear engulfed Tilotny as she realized that her powers had been taken and crushed into dirt along with her beauty, and she rebuked the Celestials for all that had befallen her.

Wutzek's globes dimmed in sadness, for he did not take pleasure in this and felt love for one even so arrogant as Tilotny, remembering that he was still her father. "Do not give in to fear. It is because of your fear of me that you first made yourself into an object to be feared. You once loved beauty, though the things you shaped were ugly and hateful. Choose love again, for that is beauty's ultimate form, and help me restore the worlds to their former course before the Architects brought horror upon them; join your brother, Horliss-Horliss, and your larger family in returning beauty to the universe, and you will see redemption and renewal."



The thing that had been Tilotny paused for a moment to consider these words. Although she could sense the sincerity behind them, for too long her thoughts had dwelt bitterly on all the injustice and betrayal she felt had been done to her. In a universe of foul, hateful, and perverse beings, concepts such as kindness and mercy were rare, and she could conceive only of devious plots and wheels within wheels. Wutzek had torn away the impregnable fortress she'd fashioned around herself like a gown, and she hated him for it. And she hated Horliss-Horliss for having left them for him.

Though it pained her not to take hold of her chance to regain her beloved shape, she throttled the desire and cleaved to her anger, disgorging a curse: "You wish me to undo that which I've done because you perceive your own hand in all that has come about. If I am your imperfect creation, then it is *you* who are responsible for the things that have transpired. And you fear that which I carry, for which reason you tricked me into transforming myself… *and* your own grandchildren. Curse you, Demon! The day is at hand when you will find yourself trapped and powerless as I am now. Curse you thrice for that which you have wrought upon my offspring, and if that which bursts forth from my womb strives to consume all until nothing is left but the skeletal remains of the worlds hanging like a necklace of bone in the starless void, remember that *you have vowed* that the Celestials will bring unto them no harm!"

Wutzek was taken aback by this prophetic speech, but mainly he felt loss. "I have vowed the the Celestials will leave your offspring in peace, and so we shall," he declared. "But as for Tilotny, she is no more. You are El'Shuddem, the Soulworm. Remember too what I have offered." Then in grief, he moved on.

El'Shuddem shuddered, but she thought then of the poem that Mnggal-Mnggal had ages ago recited. No longer able to tolerate the pain of what she had become and what was yet to come, she called upon Mordiggian, her servant, to send a part of himself into her offspring and so bring about her vengeance, and she began to circle around so that in the spinning, sinuous windings of her agonizing birth pangs she forged a force of such density that an immense wormhole formed. But as she felt the reach of his cancerous tendrils, she instantly regretted her rash decision and pushed back. Forthwith, El'Shuddem, the erstwhile Queen of the Stars, gave birth!

In delirium and hunger, offspring in the form of weird worms tunneled out from the cavity of Tilotny's womb, gnawing their way through her body as they spread forth, some through the wormhole, finding deep and dismal lairs in which to burrow within the numerous worlds of the galaxy. Though her tempestuous spirit lent them strength and a glimpse of the forgotten ages, the corruption of Mnggal-Mnggal stained them so that her offspring would thrive but come to be some of the most feared beings in the great expanse. Thus came the sinuos Silan, blasphemous Barracles, ghoulish Glooths, fearsome Faroe, scatheful Syrox, baleful Bholes, and the saturnine Schinga and Squollyhawlks, and others who magnified the all-consuming fear and negative energies bequeathed from their mother so that they became receptacles of the Anti-Force, drawing sustenance from the life-energies of the living. Sith and other sorcerers would later attempt to harness these creatures for their own purposes, polluting them with an evil they did not in themselves possess, though this would often result in the consumption of the very ones attempting this.

While many of the Soulworms burrowned into Illathurion to make their homes near to Shumath-Ghun, where the essence of their lost mother was felt the strongest, others tunneled through the Great Web into the Dreamlands, where they felt oddly drawn. Still many stayed in Skyriver, where food was found in abundance.[163]

Hundreds of lesser forms spawned from this brood and the Great Worms of the Ersetians to seed the planets and moons of Skyriver with the giant Wuffa Worms, Kdaks, Yri worms, Tikulini, Hulgren, Wandrellas, Amorbis, Burrowers, Kargul, Spice Eels, Joopas, Exogorths, Arakurth, Sliideptra, Tu Lungs, and more, all of whom were embued with the hunger and desires of El'Shuddem in her wracking moments of parturition.

As her children fed off her energies, she was drained to the point of death—a thing that had not been possible before! She realized then how Mnggal-Mnggal, the Devourer, had long before discerned her weakness and used it to manipulate her.

But perhaps there was another way.

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[163] Some became trapped in the wormhole itself, where they adapted and survived. Some lured servants to them and a few mechanically enhanced them to better hunt for prey.

Wutzek's prophetic words repeated in Tilotny's mind so that even as she was dying, she understood they were meant as a gift to help her fulfill her purpose and recover what was lost. She reached out and reached in… and there it was, hiding, afraid, blocked by a fortress of pride, resentment, and jealousy. She tore the bastion down and let what she'd guarded for an age flow out—not to restore her form or save her life, but rather to give life to one final offspring, one that had not yet emerged.

In these moments, she recovered a deep well of love that she'd thought lost long ago but which had been imprisoned for so long that it was hidden from even herself. With it, she conquered all the pain and horror that beset her. In the swelling of this strength, she channeled newfound energies for her one final child who emerged in the beautiful shape Tilotny had so prized. To ensure its strength, she called upon her siblings, Cold Danda Sine and Splendid Ap, who heeded her one final time, to pour some of themselves into her beloved offspring, where she implanted her own abiding love, resourcefulness, and power, the keys to her daughter's survival…

Only then did death take her.

As that of a bright and beautiful baby girl was the infant heir. She searched about for her mother on the nearby planet where her funny uncles had placed her, but seeing only the frightening wormhole in the distant sky, she was stricken by grief and overcome by loneliness. She sat like that for a time until a voice inside her said she must be brave and vigilant. She wasn't entirely sure, at first, what that meant, but she could tell it was important, and it gave her direction, particularly now that one of the Squollyhawlks caught sight of her luster and approached.

Cautious about this strange morsel and hungry enough to dare, the creature camouflaged itself. Atop its head it created a false face akin to that of another infant. When Tilotny's Daughter spotted it, she was puzzled by the cooing child. *Was this one like me? A brother or sister, perhaps?* But something wasn't quite right, and she *peered* deeper until at last she discerned the creature's true form and intent. This made her unhappy, at first, but also angry so that when the Squollyhawlk lunged to consume her, the Daughter of Tilotny convulsively blinked. Her eyes turned briefly luminescent and, in mid-strike, the Squollyhawlk stopped and squealed an awful sound before rupturing open into an unrecognizable mass of tissue and blood.

So had the infant been forced to kill her own sister. A voice seemed to congratulate her, and she soon discovered that although still very small, she could grow in size until she resembled the picture she held in her mind of her mother as she'd once been. *You are now in pain, but you will survive and triumph, for the galaxy is yours to do with as you will… as it had been mine. I have given you my wisdom which will come to you when needed. But it is up to you to find love and a reason for being.*

The one last thing Tilotny bestowed upon her Daughter was her name. She called her *Belot*, for it meant *Beautiful* but also *Mourning*; it was only slightly altered in later times when her darker nature became manifest to some amongst the Firstborn.

An image floated before her of all the worlds. She could look more closely at any one of them. This was a game she enjoyed. The infant blinked and found herself on one of them; it was a planet called Sfanomoë, and there she would learn and lose much. Even greater lessons and losses were yet to come, for the implanted wisdom of the Architects would come unbidden into her mind.

EVERSION OF REVERSION

Wutzek penetrated the shroud of Illathurion's funereal dimension, passing by the fantastic beings and weird whorls of this realm until he arrived at Z'lykarior and called upon Cold Danda Sine to emerge from his icy prism; and in these far-off worlds of Otherspace, he saw to it that all were made witness to the events that unfolded.

Wutzek said: "I am your maker and the one who first shaped you, and above me is the One who shaped me. Though I have done you a terrible wrong, I reach out to you now, for you have the power to reverse the evil you have done and restore things to how they should be. Do this, and you will be given new gifts and life."

But Cold Danda Sine smiled grimly. "I know of no maker, *maker*, only the great Void, and that is the sole master, for all others are but its servants. I will not reverse my reversions, nor provide restoration, for that is, as with all things, dull."

"You were not meant to be what you are," Wutzek stated, "and for that, I bear grave responsibility and contrition. But since it is you who made yourself into what you've become—you who were without constraint or lack of anything—why do you speak with such resignation and melancholy?"

"There is no pleasure left to me," said Cold Danda Sine dolefully, "for I have seen and done all… All that is at first novel becomes tiresome; all that is young and new decays and grows old; all that once held promise turns toilsome; all that purports to be true proves false, for futility lies at the heart of all. All things end in death. Would that I do as you wish, reverse my inversions and restore everything to light and splendor, the light would only again dim; the splendor would sour to rust and ash; all that has happened will happen again in endless cycles with lessening glory than at first, for this is the way of the worlds… and it is wearisome beyond reckoning."

"Indeed," Wutzek intoned as his glowing orbs shifted and swirled, "for you have seen the worlds in decrescent circles and learned the *ultimate* truth—*or so you believe*. But you were not there at the first. You had not seen us dance in abandon at the foremost strains of melody in the glow of the aureate and cerulean emperies, had not heard the refulgent promise of eternal quotidian bliss, nor felt the electrum incalescence of love that is coming to replace the wheels of futility and death. All these things I should have shown you and would show you still…"

For a moment, Cold Danda Sine was silent. The blazing globes of Wutzek's light contrasted against the black sphere of Sine's night. Then he bitterly murmured, "If you had wished it, you or your Maker could have cast all these worlds and dimensions in a net, sending them back through time to start anew, a universe renascent…"

"It is not our wish to go backwards, for here is a history that demonstrates truths that should not be forgotten, and there is much one can learn from it."

"What I have learned is that I must bring these bitter cycles to an end… Thus will I destroy all, for it is better that suffering should end quickly than to linger ever on…"

"That would be easier than having to face the consequences of your choices and make better ones… as Horliss-Horliss has done."

"Your *Chosen One*!" Sine spat.

"You too are my Chosen One, as your siblings!"

Sine sighed. "It is too late for fatherly love, and I have no strength left for distant hopes and far-off promises."

So Wutzek said, "In that case, I have something that may please you more. You had been a master of the anti-concept, but the final challenge yet remains: the ultimate contradiction, a paradox that you have not yet attained and the final new thing. Although you live, you exist as one who is dead. If you are able, you should reverse that paradigm so that you might come alive."

Cold Danda Sine considered this, and for a moment, his crimson features alit in the thought that this *was* the final paradox. From his earliest moments of life, death was the first thing he'd conceived… and loathed. *Could it be that in death, I might yet know life?* He wondered at this. *Tilotny would have said it was a trick, a means for Wutzek to save his people from the certain annihilation that I plan to bring upon them. But ever she was a victim of the lie, particularly those lies she told herself.*

It was peculiar that in as much as he'd come to abhor her ways, he missed her, and in her passing—which he'd felt—he had diminished as well so that nothing now brought him pleasure, save perhaps his thoughts of Aerimus; but even this was mingled with grief, for he'd had a vision of what the future held for him.

"Do not think that I am unaware of your true agenda," Sine charged. "You seek to save this galaxy from annihilation. You do them no favors, but I suppose it matters little. They are not worthy of your compassion."

"A thing can serve more than one purpose," Wutzek replied. "What I have said is true. That they are unworthy is also true. But we will have compassion for them anyway, for that is who we are."

This was a new thing and a deep well that Sine had never truly plumbed, and one he supposed he could now explore in this final act. Perchance that in this restitution that Wutzek spoke of he might bring about a kind of greatness that in his cynicism he'd never before believed, he agreed to the infrangible solitude of death. "You abandoned me at my birth. I suppose it is good that you are here at my death. Perhaps you might even assist me in this endeavor…" So it came about that with the aid of Wutzek, Cold Danda Sine's body collapsed unto itself to become a storming vortex of deadly forces and raging energies of chaos, enigma, and antithesis.

And Wutzek spoke sadly and said: "Cold Danda Sine is no more. He has become the eversion of a reversion and has created a new thing. But in time, even death will invert, as is the way of Cold Danda Sine…"

SAIL THE SHIP OF TIME

Trembling at the power of Wutzek and the death of an Architect, the massed entities of Illathurion hid in terror lest they too be destroyed, as they assumed had happened. Typhojem alone hesitated, glowering at Wutzek with unyielding hate. From that moment forth, he would seek nothing but Wutzek's destruction. Yet, for now, he too passed into the greater dark unto Vhoorl to stew and plot.

Splendid Ap approached, for he was curious of this being that he recalled from another time and place. With Tilotny and Cold Danda Sine gone, he'd lost much of his former power and felt befuddled and thick. *Was this how most sapients felt?*

Wutzek said to Splendid Ap: "I am your maker and the one who first shaped you, and above me is the One who shaped me. Though I have done you a terrible wrong, I reach out to you now, for you have the power to reverse the evil you have done and restore things to how they should be. Do this, and you will be given new gifts and life."

And Splendid Ap, feeling a sudden insight, said in his language of numbers and dials that few besides his kinfolk could understand, "I recollect that you were also the one who sought to unmake us, though it has taken me long to understand why. You well know that I no longer have the power to reverse all that we had done and restore all to how it was before—for I *had* been a master of time and space—and yet even if I could, I would not, as I estimate that to do so would be to violate inviolate laws which I have come to intuit is unwise, though I do not fully apprehend why that may be."

"Tell me how you mistook peace for aggrievement? Saw love as a thing to be trampled? Joy as a state to be destroyed? What right had any of you to disrupt all that was vital and flourishing in life?"

"I have… *regrets*," Ap said in a small voice, "too many to recount; obsessions with nonessentials that seemed essential; abdication of responsibility to others deemed wiser, more assured, prepossessed of a narrative that rewrote history to favor *us*—the persecuted and lost… Nonetheless, it was not all in vain, for I know now that the things destroyed can be restored. It does not remove the fact that we caused such damage, however, and though it is a small thing, I have learned from what I have seen and done… and even accomplished things that few can claim."

"You are a *curious* one," said Wutzek. "Would that I had gotten to know you. Alas, tell me, what things have you accomplished in your long time in these planes?"

"In sidereal flight, I sailed the ship of time across the vast oceans of damascene, fleeing the gods of the starry isles and all the phantom-sultans' tenebrae. The iridescent moons sang unheard songs to the night while the Firebirds told tales of the Dream-Lords' enchanted hall deep in the heart of morn. I spied the interlunar motes of life, microscopic and microcosmic, pirouetting as lovers whirling at the dawn of time when the great wing'd beasts of *draumar* seeded the skies in rainbow hues of red, yellow, and blue."

"Come with me now," Wutzek offered. "Learn what it means to be truly splendid when you enable the multitudes to experience the sublimity you have but touched."

"Perhaps I shall. Though too long serving the lie of injurious self-aggrandizement, I observed this impossibility: in the face of engulfing darkness, most life will move to the light should even an iota of it appear… Yes, I feel it would be a relief."

With that, Wutzek led Splendid Ap out of Skyriver through straight paths and sunlit spheres the Architects had never before seen to bestow upon him the wisdom, compassion, justice, and balance of power that the other Celestials had received in the Dawn Age so that he came to attain apotheosis. Now entrusted with a great task, one that would make special use of his talents, he moved forth in time.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

THE FEARFUL POTENCIES OF NIGHT

In the power vacuum that came with the parting of the Architects, several sovereignties arose who'd been tasked to carry out the iniquitous work of their hidden masters.

The Janoon people of Jandoon were a deeply religious society. Not unlike the Essulines, they sought to restore a galaxy that had fallen into decline. Basing their laws and beliefs on what few teachings of the Celestials they'd collected and codified into what they called the Principles, the governing body, known as the Barbican, inaugurated the proselytization of all the worlds they could reach by means of the small but growing fleet they'd acquired, resulting in a large, mixed group of sapients upon Jandoon.

But with growth came a tiered organization and hierarchy run by those who were less sensible and sympathetic than their predecessors. Claiming to have special insight, the Barbican of this era added interpretations, rules, regulations, and traditions of their own, and this they called the Charter. Accepting that their leaders were wiser than they, the majority took these at face value and came to regard the Charter as having the same import as the Principles.

At this time, only a few of their people knew of the Code of the Celestials then being circulated amongst them, and they came to regard the Charter as violating it in letter and spirit. But when the Code was brought to their attention, the Barbican rejected it as contrary to their traditions. To offset any doubts their people might harbor, the Barbican claimed the prophecies indicated that the gods would soon anoint faithful Janoon as kings and queens of the galaxy, and they pushed this interpretation while demonizing anyone who spoke against the Principles, which the Charter was now folded into. This contented most, but still talk of the Code endured.

The Barbican became more imperious, enforcing order by means of Tenders appointed to ensure rigid adherence to the Principles and persecuting even minor infractions of the law. Those deemed Renegades were shunned until they re-pledged their allegiance, but their numbers grew so large that they were sent to underground prisons constructed in the Sunken Lands. Although their basic needs were provided and visits from the Tenders came monthly, there was great scarcity and misery there, and this was tolerated to help Renegades "come to their senses."

Long years passed in this way, but as the prophecies of the Barbican continually failed to come to pass, they were readjusted and excused as new insights, causing even some of the Tenders to have doubts. It was at this time that a singular book found its way into the hands of a Tender named Nape Bela.

The book was called the *Invocation of Spectral Light,* and though few at this time knew it, it was one of the legendary Forbidden Books of the Ethereal. The manuscript

had been purposely designed to deceive, craftily presenting the words of the Celestials but with subtle twists, reinterpreted meanings, and spellcraft designed to look like supplications to the Elder Gods and an overarching ideology intended to make the actual teachings of the Celestials seem small-minded, repressive, and controlling.

The more he read it, the more Nape Bela felt enlightened, and he now saw the Barbican as having manipulated the Janoon in order to maintain their power. After sharing the book with several other Tenders with whom he regularly associated, they came to agree that its discovery was no coincidence and that the time had come for change. Deeming the newfound wisdom of the *Invocation of Spectral Light* as the key to that change, copies of the book were made and distributed.

In the years that followed, Nape Bela and his allies became a thorn in the side of the Barbican, who sent them to the Sunken Lands. But in this, the Barbican erred, for the former Tenders appealed to the Renegades who yet dwelt there, and led a religious renaissance that declared independence from the Barbican. This rival governing body was known as the Sunken, and now they plotted their escape and takeover.

Not all followed the Sunken. Some who read the *Invocation* argued that while the Barbican and the Charter should be removed, the *Invocation* belonged to the works of the Enemy and was thus not the solution, but their voices were ignored.

By the time the Barbican learned what was going on, it was too late. Copies of the *Invocation* had spread even to the common people of Janoon. When their denunciation failed, they followed with persecution, but this now led to civil strife. With the passing of the eldest Barbican, the Tender that was appointed to replace him was one Elwood Greor, and he argued that their division was counterproductive and in opposition to the Principles. The solution, he contended, was to incorporate the *Invocation*, pardon those in the Sunken Lands, and admit Nape Bela to their ranks.

After a heated debate, the Barbican agreed. To inaugurate the new changes and receive the blessings of the gods, Greor, Bela, and the leaders of the Barbican would, in each assembly throughout Jandoon, read aloud one of the *Invocation's* supplications. The *Invocation of Spectral Light* contained several. The one that Nape Bela chose was called *summonitum saticon* (Summoning of the Urumolki). Based on its description, they took the word saticon to be an archaic form of the Elder Gods. Its instructions required an altar constructed of metal, stone, and wood wrought into a starry design and topped with the rare and precious Hedron Stone, an angled, shining gem found only on Yugami, which the Tenders procured on one of their recent pilgrimages. The eighteen-foot-tall structure was then placed in the largest grotto in the Sunken Lands, which would be consecrated as a place of worship. Small versions were placed in each of the designated assembly halls on Jandoon.

Tens of thousands of elated Janoon gathered in various congregations across the country for the ritual. At the preordained time, the invocation was read. The echo of the words resonated like claps of thunder in the mountains. The temperature dropped. The shining Hedron Stone turned opaque, and each of the starry altars began to glow with an unearthly light. Collectively, the people held their breath as white, flowing *shapes* came out of the altars. For several moments, the spectral forms

began floating in and amongst the attendees, who stood in awe and wonder. Some laughed nervously. Some gave an outcry of rejoicing.

As the glowing forms began dipping into some individuals, they wondered breathlessly, *Are we being chosen?* Some of this elation died when these individuals fell to the ground convulsing. The crowd grew uneasy then, but a few thought, *perhaps they were unworthy*. When the light of the gods dimmed into dark shadows, many grew alarmed, but they reasoned that *the* Invocation *teaches that the gods are manifestations of light* and *dark*. But as they began swooping down, taking one life after another in increasing numbers, terror took hold, and panic ensued as the people at last realized that something had gone dreadfully wrong.

Nape Bela and the Barbican stood aghast. The gods were supposed to elevate them, for this is what the book described. What they did not understand was that the Urumolki were not Celestials. The Code of the Celestials had included warnings against this, noting the *Uru Moloki* were Black Angels or Shadow Kings. The "prayer" they'd read, *summonitum saticon*, gave permission for the Shadow Kings and their people to take the bodies of the living or dead.

Thousands were now juddering in spasms, while others trampled one another in fright and confusion as the Urumolki took possession of some and killed any who tried to oppose them. In a week's time, Janoon civilization had been taken over, ruled by the Shadow Kings in the skins of the former Barbican. By day, Shadows subjugated their host bodies, using them to find and corral any who had not already been captured. By night, they lay their stolen flesh to an uneasy rest, leaving only the unhoused Shadows to roam the dimly lit streets as foul spirits with erubescent eyes.

It was at this time that the Janoon in hiding had the best chance at escape, and a few did, taking ships to nearby worlds to report what had occurred—" Mass murder!" they cried when they arrived. "Things with the skins of friends!" But most did not believe such tales were anything but hoaxes or the psychological disturbances of madmen. There were, however, a few who credited their accounts and agreed to ascertain the problem and help.

Those who came to Jandoon came prepared, and some had a small measure of success in rescuing those yet in hiding. But the Shadows had the greater advantage. If the shells they'd inhabited decayed or were destroyed, their blackened spirits would move on to another victim. And for a time, they could hide inside hosts without revealing themselves. In this way, they extended their reach to other worlds…

So did some come as uninvited guests to the mountain passes of Brodo Asogi.

As part of the Resolute, Asogians had not fought in the Cosmic Wars. They knew they were protected, and so they protected their paradisiac world and all that dwelt upon it. After removing their Hypergates, they re-utilized the technology for a more useful application: any ship or entity that approached their world with hostile intent was repelled, as enemy agents discovered time and again when they suddenly found themselves in an uninhabited sector of space. But such technology, impressive as it was, could not work on the Shadow Beings who slid into Brodo Asogi.

The Green Planet lay in the Seventh Nebula of Galactus and was at one time known as Vomestra. To confuse the Enemy, the Asogians renamed it Od-Di-Pa 5 in the Empyrean Wars, Tum Lux O-ty in the War of Temporal Planes, and Alata Zerka in the Twilight Wars. But the name that it's known by today is Brodo Asogi.[164]

Upon this world grew the widest diversity of plant-life in all the planets of the universe. Much of their flora was sentient and most of the fauna sapient, for the Asogians had made them so in the Earliest Days in order to better communicate with them. Feeling an obligation to continue to help the galaxy at large, they hadn't departed the terrestrial plane for the Unseen Realm of the Celestials and continued distributing plants for food and healing throughout the galaxy. None now recall, but some of the healing flora found today exists because of the work done by the Asogians and their Ordu-schell, Ithorians, Octusi, and other offspring in those long-forgotten days.

Though it was unfortunate that the First Ones in the Council had chosen to pay them no heed, Brodo Asogi, its moons, Lakama and Oto, and sun, Monshoo, had survived the Cosmic Wars intact. Not all of their offspring had. When the Ordu-schell, then led by Lord Varzad Ramyan before his death, discovered that Humans were capturing and dining on their beloved Mupples, a cousin of the Flopglopples, they raced off in their Great Interplanetary Arks to rescue as many as they could from around the galaxy. Unfortunately, the creatures multiplied rapidly and could not all be retrieved. From that point on, the Ordu-schell joined the Judicious.

Asogians referred to the Celestials as Great Beings of Light and Magicians, not because they performed tricks as lesser magicians, but because their magic made things come alive. As with all of the Precursor races, Asogians had this ability too, but while other Elder Races lost the gift when they rejected the ancient decree, the Asogians retained it. In the Circle of the Resolute, it was agreed that it was wisest not to bring new races into a galaxy fallen in darkness and instead help those that needed it.

To the dismay of the Shadows who had come to Brodo Asogi, they could not overtake the Asogians, so they instead thought to corrupt them. But in this they failed as well, with less than a handful succumbing. These three became known as the Lords of the Underworld. And as they mined the moons for metal, comets for diamonds, and the depths of the planet for sources of power, they also adopted new names, Electrum, Sinistro, and Occulta, and armored themselves with coverings that the Urumolki helped fashion from choice vegetal and mineral matter that had long before been used to create their Great Ships.

Once they'd amassed and developed sufficient arms and supplies, the Lords of the Underworld revolted against the Lords of Lucidulum—a thing that had never before happened. Stealing one of the Xrus-Ones and establishing their capital at Crystellum, they went forth to vie for rule of Vomestra! The Asogians were ideologically opposed to violence, but that did not mean they would sit idly by, nor did the Great Ship

[164] *Vomestra* means "the Womb;" *Od-Di-Pa 5*: "Immersed in Song;" *Tum Lux O-ty*: "Complete Light of the Egg;" *Alata Zerka*: "Love Fostered;" *Brodo Asogi*: "Plant Brew." Asogians, thus, identify themselves as "Plant People."

cooperate with their theft. The Lords of Lucidulum would not injure their fallen brothers, but nor would they allow them to do harm, for they were not without power, and the evildoers were soon caught. Electrum, Sinistro, and Occulta were sentenced to remain in their underground lair and were henceforth known as the Subterranean Ones. As to the Shadow Beings who'd corrupted them—powerless and pathetic in the thin layer of epidermis they were now forced to don as vestments—they dwell atop the high mountains far from the Asogians, frightening younglings and Flopglopples who wander too far, but otherwise unable to do much more.

But it was from these unclean spirits whom the Asogians call "the Fearful Potencies of Night," that they learned of the evil that had come to claim Jandoon as unholy ground, transforming it into a counterworld consumed by the aboleths beckoning from the Abyss. For the Lords of Lucidulum and all of the sapient inhabitants of Brodo Asogi, their hearts were unequivocal: "If we do not intervene, darkness will spread from that world to contaminate the whole of the sector until the entire galaxy is under its shroud. We are called to help, and so we go!"

The incarnation of the Urumolki on the spiritually-contaminated world of Jandoon was a dangerous matter even to the Asogians, for the embodied Shadow Kings wielded power akin to the Phantom Lords of the Charnel Worlds to which Jandoon was now linked. Despite this, the Lords of Wisdom, who are the crowned Mind Holders of Vomestra, had to turn aside countless volunteers as they boarded their Great Ships.

Several Xrus-Ones now landed atop the wide and flat perimeter of Beitel Hill, which looked down upon the world's principal city of Luz and its surrounding towns.

They had not come unnoticed. Scornful specters whispered that they would not have long to wait for the sinewy Firstborn flesh they would soon possess.

At nightfall, their skin sacks were abandoned, dropped to the dirt as castoff refuse and forgotten as the Urumolki legions floated into the desolate aether up the steep prominence towards their visitors. *"There stand the Lords of Fools, and with them the vermin of Brodo Asogi, all unarmed, bleating like lambs ignorant of the falling blade!"*

The *vermin* he spoke of included some of the more unusual denizens of their world. There were the ethereal, shapeshifting Mind Holders, who served as sages and superscientists and had been the first amongst their race; the Destiny Dreamers, who received visions of the future; the transparent, foot-long Micro Techs who helped advance and maintain their technology. Even some of their sapient fauna and flora had come along: the Igigi Gyrum Hadahadeba, who were the Flopglopples; Jumpum Elders, who were motile trees; Eruca Vara, who were the Fusion Blooms; the intelligent but haughty Antum Tadana; the impish Tickli Moot-Moot; and the strange Dagon Sabad, their most ancient reed, ruler of all plants and even greater than Antum Tadana, for he was the secret quickener of the Cosmic Egg.[165]

Like gathering thunderheads and black cumuli, the powers that now ruled Jandoon rose ominously up the hill to engulf all they touched in a darkness so thick it blotted out the stars.

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[165] *Dagon Sabad* translates to "tentacle grain" and is a kind of giant land anemone.

In moments, the Asogians were standing in absolute pitch. Their heart-lights, normally aglow, were smothered by a pall of absolute and infinite rottenness. They knew in their hearts that in this veil of evil all life would cease and pass into the emptiness of eternal night, for an Asogian's heart filled out his entire chest cavity and had been designed not merely to pump blood but serve as the source of empathy from which one could sense the greater truth behind words and deeds. Now as the Darkness began to suffocate and drown them, seeping from their eyes into their brains, they knew something else as well: they had been tasked from the Great Beings of Light to do what they might to stem the icy floe ere it wash over the cosmic sea.

"What did you hope to accomplish? Did you think yourself as the Elder Gods? You have no power over us. You were lured here, like flies to the corpse! Now it is too late," the Shadows gloated. *"We will make better use of your meat!"*

It took but one to start the cycle, and that one, the Eldest of the Parents, reached out to the greatest of power sources, that ineffable light known as *Love*, and lit bright his heart-light together with the tips of his finger. He touched Antum Tadana and received renewed strength in return as she reached out her long tendrils to the Jumpums and Fusion Blooms, who connected back to the Destiny Dreamers and Mind Holders until, one after the other, the Asogians all began to light up.

The Darkness laughed. *"If the sun does not terrify us, why would your pathetic pinpricks of heart-and-finger lights? What simpletons are the Children of the Celestials! It was said that the faithful amongst the Firstborn cannot die. No doubt you believe that fable. But your Magicians merely whisked away their servants in order to promulgate that myth… and there are no Celestials here! How delightful the taste of your despair will be!"*

Of course, the Shadows had not been there at the very beginning, but that detail mattered little to them. All they knew was that the bodies of an Elder Race would soon belong to them, and though they saw those forms as ugly and squat, their spirits were another matter, with the potential—once dominated—to make their possessors invulnerable! And if, indeed, the Asogians could *not* die, their minds would remain prisoned in torment for as long it suited them, helpless but to watch as they led their forces to the feast of the damned when next they moved on to the other Elder Races and their offspring… on and on until none but the hosts of Illathurion were left!

The small lights of the Asogians had continued to expand until every member was aglow, and the hill resembled the night sky as it had been before the Darkness blotted it out. The Urumolki pressed in tighter to choke out the life-force of the extraterrestrials and their pathetic illumination, jeering as the creatures reached out their arms to touch one another, likely to try to offer comfort in the face of their coming doom. The Black Angels reviled this mawkish display and moved in to devour and enter them. The Asogians could feel their insides souring. *So this is death*.

The Great Ships of Vomestra were living beings. They had been instructed beforehand to wait for this moment. It had been the hardest task they'd ever had to do. Now, heroically, each of the Xrus-Ones beamed in brightness. Consequently, the rest of the flora and fauna began to glow sunnier, or moonier, in some cases, as each reflected

their light-source of choice, for they had apiece brought with them aspects of Lakama, Oto, and Monshoo. At last, the Flopglopples chirped and chittered and reached across to that great mountain reed that sat in the center of their assembly, Dagon Sabad.

In a soundless burst, the light from the mass of them blossomed like the rays of a thousand stars. It was no weapon that any had previously conceived. It was merely the Power of the Cosmos multiplied and manifested—the Secret of Life that all the races had once known and forgotten. Not merely were the Shadow Beings rendered blind by it, but their ectoplasmic forms began to melt as they were assailed by a searing pain never before known to them. They uttered a collective screech and then were gone.

How could mere death stand before Life? the Asogians said. *How could abject hate stand before Love?*

Only the Shadow Kings remained, and they were diminished into Shadow Spirits, kings no longer, and forced to flee before the burning light. After passing through the torrefying voids and parched hollows, they reconstituted in the pocket dimension of Tartis within the Chiloon Rift that would later be known as the Bubble of the Lost. Like a beacon they would draw others of a similar malignancy. Most would not survive the feeding. One pernicious group that later did was a long-forgotten Sith cult known as the End Lords (*Qorit'ari* in the Sith tongue) and the Azrayl, for each subsequent leader took the title *Azrayl* from the name of their first. And so successfully had they kept themselves hidden that academics and even Jedi remain uncertain as to whether the cult actually existed.

A few Shadow Beings managed to survive on Jandoon, but they had had to escape into the deep ruins or the Sunken Lands where yet they remain, trapped and thirsting for treasure hunters foolhardy enough to plumb the ruins. And some were indeed lured to their lairs by accursed artifacts like the Eye of the Beyonder.

Only the Brizzit dwell on Jandoon now, exiles from their homeworld of Illna, and from them came the saying: "Those who seek the treasures of Jandoon do not come back the same… if they come back at all."

Yet not even the brave and noble Asogians escaped unscathed, for Darkness had touched them. The only way their brilliant and innocent minds could cope with such a strain was to push out the horrors with childlike reverie. Their bodies became subject to aging as well, but the process occurred slowly over the course of many millennia and would not kill them but offer passage into the Great Mystery, for which reason Elders came to be surrounded by an unfathomable aura of bliss that would see them pass into a mist that opened to the Unseen Realm.

The Asogians received all this as a blessing, for they were grateful to have halted the Fearful Potencies of Night. And yet their Destiny Dreamers speak of a coming age in which the Darkness will return, immense and formidable, but they do not dwell on such things, confident that an even greater light than their own will arise at that time to dispel it. And so they carry on their tasks, tending their voluminous gardens and variegated plants, pets, and offspring with a cheerful disposition and inner joy, unconcerned about what the next day might bring.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

SCOURGE OF THE SUNS

It has been said that Typhojem so despised discourse that for every word he spoke, a living creature was put to death in his name. So it was with barely concealed loathing that Typhojem invoked the aid of Thargorograht: *"Foul majesty that art my sister, summon forth your roaring sultans, for I have long known they have a tourmaline of vast power that I seek to use for a time."*

Thargorograht responded in her wheezing clicks and susurrations: "The Stone of Shadow is not for you, dread king and brother, but for the protection of my offspring who must soon go forth if this war is to be won. Also, the Hypergates have by now nearly all been destroyed or hidden from your face."

"It is not to pierce the dimensions that I now demand the Stone of Shadow," Typhojem swore, *"though I have not forgotten that you forsook to answer my summons then, for we might yet rule the spheres in this domain and beyond had you done so."*

"Speak not of treachery," warned the Night Spirit, "for I know of your hand in the destruction of my children on Geonosis!"

"Do not feign to mourn the lesser *servants! Do not your Daughters sacrifice their own brood? Had you not hoarded the Stone of Shadow, I would have had no need!"* He refused to deny what he'd done but made it clear by implication that he considered her a hypocrite. It was well-known amongst the rulers of Illathurion that Thargorograht's Daughters killed any newly-hatched offspring that emerged small or weak… and the tale of Daar'ok'straedr continued to resound.

Pleased at the recollection that sprang into her mind of her grandson aiding the Cthol in defying Typhojem, Thargorograht relented. "By virtue of our rotting father and because I know what it is you have planned, I shall allow you to use it—*for a time!*" She called forth the King of the Night Spirit to give unto Typhojem the precious gem. Growling mightily at him, for the Disciples of the Night Spirit hated the rivals of their mistress, he did so. "You would be wise to return it to him when you have accomplished this task, for the gem is sanctified in the blood of a thousand adepts sacrificed under the black moon in the Carrion Gardens of Azerdaaque. Also, it is *mine!*"

By this, Typhojem understood that his sister and her forces would never relent if he were to keep it; she could communicate telepathically with many of her insect swarms and spies, including some that now massed with Typhojem, which meant that the location of the Shadow Stone would always be known by her, for such a ritual would not have been mere ceremony.

Never would she have lent him the stone if she did not recognize the need for his mission to succeed. She'd learned much of the Crystal Riders from the Stone of Shadow and knew that Kadavra would never betray her; and she might even learn some secrets about her detestable sibling. Knowledge was the one thing Thargorograht hoarded above all else, and for this reason did she choose to remain in the concealment of her crepuscular lair, for Typhojem's coming battle with the Celestials would resolve with his end or theirs. Much was about to change.

Among the Shadow Stone's various powers was the protection it gave against destructive forces. With it, Typhojem safely descended into the raging whirlwinds that had once been his sire. Braving the crushing forces that stormed beyond the ergosphere where the greatest pressures were exerted, he held against the vortex the living carmine gems, Carnel and Cornus, and upon them cast ghastly, necromantic runes. The terrific pull of the magnetic fields focused on those enchanted gems so that they transferred and absorbed those properties into themselves and became Gems of Fury. And with that, the apex of the electrical tempest was forever changed into a marvel of silence, for its fury was now spent. So awful did this region become that even Typhojem, in all his malignancy, could not stand its solemnity and what it portended, and time would touch nothing that passed into it.

Typhojem now gathered a legion of malignant forces into his newly constructed megalithic, quinquangular ship, the *Nil-Apharas* (also called the *Pale Slayer* and *Hallowed Destroyer*). Four hundred who'd gathered from the native worlds and sundry races of Illathurion were slaughtered to celebrate its maiden voyage. Of all the grotesque and deadly vessels that came out of Illathurion during this period, this was by far the greatest, even greater than the semi-sentient Pyramid-ships of Kordil that disrupted the Hyperspace lanes of any sector in which they lingered.

Captained by Si'Kranash, one of Typhojem's cruelest lieutenants, the *Nil-Apharas* led a smaller fleet into Realspace. Like the arrow that flies by night, the Great Priest flew into the Deep Core to take for himself his mother's remains, and there he came upon the tremendous rift that was the wormhole of El'Shuddem, torn open in her death-winding throes. Into the massive corpse he declined, heading deep inside its fulminating core where he located the crystallized remains of his hated mother's heart. It was a small and hard thing, and upon it he weaved a second invultuation. But the turbulent wormhole trebled in potency and increased in violence, causing several wormholes to branch off from it as roving cyclones shooting throughout Realspace in cataclysm and death. Unable to understand what was happening or why, Typhojem erupted from the orifice in a state of rage, for he'd nearly been trapped within it, but the Stone of Shadow lent him the strength to break free just as the original became far more redoubtable and descended into itself to become a portal to that mysterious, ethereal realm that is called the Netherworld of the Force.

So troubled was he by this portentous chain of events that he nearly abandoned his scheme. But a glimpse at El'Shuddem's opaque crystal restored his resolve, and he departed in search of Splendid Ap, intent on creating a third power source, one that he believed when united with the other two would grant him greater potency than

any Celestial. But Splendid Ap could not be found, nor was rumor of him heard in the galaxy, and Typhojem conceded that he had either perished with Pithem or shifted to other planes of existence.

Typhojem again considered keeping the Shadow Stone, for he longed to see the downfall of Thargorograht. Yet his sister knew the blackness of his heart, and her servants ever kept a watchful eye on him. Yet, even with the precious Crystal Rider, the Night Queen would not easily be defeated. Should he dare offend her, she would wage an eternal war against him, and that was a distraction he could not at this time allow. Besides, together they would prove a mightier force than apart, and he called to the King of the Night Spirit and handed the Stone of Shadow into the steel-like claws of the one who was crowned, and with an insolent gleam, the disgusting creature flew off to his mistress. The Heart of El'Shuddem, the Gems of Fury, and his secret weapon would have to be sufficient for the task ahead.

The *Nil-Apharas* arrived at Sarn, a planet chosen for its unusually dark nexus. The cyclopean ship hovered in atmosphere above Sarn's surface and awaited nightfall. Hostile and paranoid, the residents gathered from all around, some to rail at the massive golden ship, some to plot theft and murder. A particularly wicked and cruel people, the Human Sarnites were scrupulously avoided by their galactic neighbors.

In the deepest part of the night, Typhojem gave the order for his spawn to feed.

Like maze-flies to raw meat, they descended in a swarm to scoop up and engulf the vicious men, women, and children, rending flesh, tearing limbs, and chewing heads. By the end of the feast, every living person had been hunted down and devoured, save for one, Hiram Cortin. Driven mad by what he'd been forced to witness, he was deposited on Mukura (what would later be known as Myrkr) to spread word of the doom that came to Sarn, which was thereafter regarded with evil repute and renamed *Garn*, which meant "haunted." And there are those who say it still is….

The outcry of horror and suffering in the ripples of the Living Force reached Wutzek as he was traversing the spaces between worlds hunting the Starweirds and nameless *others* who prowled the starless void.

He arrived to find Garn a land of the dead. Wutzek next came to Mukura, where he was escorted by Lady Amm, Primeval of the Neti, to the prison where Hiram Cortin was now confined, bloodied and blind from having clawed his eyes out. Betwixt his psychopathic and demoniacal ravings, Wutzek was able to glean from him the story of his world's demise. At his departure, Wutzek warned Lady Amm that Cortin would ever be a danger to himself and others. "There is no coming back from the darkness that has seared his soul… and the heart of this one was consumed by evil long before the Old One arrived."

But still feeling guilt from their hasty decision to imprison their brethren, they reasoned that with time and rest, the last survivor of Sarn might be restored. It was a decision they would come to regret. The incessant scratching and phrenetic speech of Hiram Cortin was no mere psychotic break, and after Wutzek departed, it shifted into a summoning that was heard by the Serpent Lords of Drômencas… and they sent to Mukura an army with one goal in mind: eradication.

Well-trained in the ways of killing, a murder of Tylunn Night Soarers swept down with a force of parang-wielding Sith and a large Bitthævrian complement, each unit commanding a pack of Vornskrs.

Refusing to be driven from their world and leave its denizens to the brutality of monstrous invaders, the Neti steeled themselves to fight back. Neti Wizards weaved inosculated spells, altering their Ysalamiri pets so that the creatures could project invisible, protective fields around themselves and any living being inside them. Outside of these fields, the Living Force could not be felt. The Neti placed groups of them around their villages, generating an extensive bubble within which they'd be undetectable save by sight, and even that would prove difficult given their nature.

Then, Neti Fighters, wearing each an Ysalamir and disguised as one of the many trees that grew on this world, struck out against the hunters. Sinewy, branch-like arms whipped out, beheading and impaling marching invaders and plucking Night Soarers out of the sky. Heavy, hidden tendrils and roots ensnared entire companies, burying them alive. Sith and Bitthævrians turned from confident killers to terrified prey as they were felled in the hundreds.

One Tylunn Night Soarer alone returned to his yacht to find it surrounded by a forest he hadn't recalled seeing when first he'd arrived. Hiram Cortin was dead, splayed open and arrayed like a diabolic tree. The army they'd come with was dead in the branches and boughs of the trees. He cursed them and vowed to return with a fleet to rain fire on the forests. On powering the ship, he was troubled to find it would not start. It was then that the "forest" came alive and swallowed their would-be tormentor. The fleet-footed Vornskrs, having earlier sensed the danger, migrated to far off lands that did not have a high concentration of Neti. They alone survived.

Triumphant, the Neti retaliated in kind, sending a stealth ship to Drômencas to seed it with a special kind of sapling that grew a pervasive and rapidly-growing Worldforest. Drômencas would ever find itself continually consumed by sprawling trees. But that part of the mission was more of a symbolic assault, for the Neti with their Ysalamiri had hitched a ride. With the Sith distracted by the uncanny growth of woods all about their cities, the unseen Neti emerged. Shattering the sigil upon which was cast an enchantment of languor that kept prisoners-of-war compliant, the Neti freed as many as would come. A surprising amount would not, but that was on them.

The infuriated Ssither punished the Sith people exceedingly for their failures. But this backfired, causing seething resentment amongst the Sith who determined to never again allow themselves to be humiliated by the Serpent People, a point they made clear by the murder and conspicuous display of Anetân-Tranth's tormented body before the pyramidal Synagogue of the Serpent. This prompted the Ssither to slaughter the current Sith Sovereign and his family, arranging the parts of their bodies they didn't consume in a wicked symbol at the foot of their home. After this, they sealed up their temples in which were kept the Sith's most coveted secrets.

Wutzek did not have long to search for Typhojem. Word reached him that the Great Priest had at last turned his attention to the Kathol, bent on their demise.

But this was a ploy, and while the anxious Cthol scrambled to hide in their Lifewell, Typhojem prepared the trap for his actual prey.

As expected, Wutzek entered the sector and drew near to the *Nil-Apharas*.

Just as he began to examine the strange craft that created so odd a dimensional and gravitational ripple around itself, Dread Typhojem emerged with the ghastly armies of the Old Ones pouring out of the vessel behind him like a swarm of seething bees. Wutzek sneered. *As if they stand a chance!* He would first give them the opportunity to turn from their desolate course. But those who would not would not be imprisoned this time. They would be eliminated. He might even enjoy it.

Above Typhojem's raised left hand floated the magnetic Heart of El'Shuddem and a diamond-like crystal. "What you see before you is the heart of a daughter *you* failed to protect!" Serving as the voice of Typhojem, Gou'Vias the Xothian seethed with scorn, intending to get a rise out of the supernal being. "The other is called the Soul-Destroyer and was forged from the one thing in existence that *can* ensnare your kind." [166]

"But it is not your capture that interests us," another Xothian, P'ghui-Y, revealed as Typhojem telekinetically plucked from his arms the Gems of Fury. It had taken an inordinate amount of trials, but they'd finally discovered that while separated they caused havoc, together they could treble their Master's turbulent power.

"It seems you have grown senile, Old One," Wutzek mocked. "Irrespective of how powerful they are, gems and crystals cannot harm one such as me! I would know, for I know of you, where you broke through of old, and where you intend to break through again. I know whence you first trod Urthha's fields, and where you tread them still!"

But Typhojem only lifted up his arm and suddenly he found himself immobilized.

That was unexpected! Wutzek cooled his globules and calmly stated, "One such as I cannot die. Put aside your wasted, impotent rage and join with me and your brother to restore this galaxy that was ruined not by you, but by a progenitor you hate."

Typhojem replied, "You *are my progenitor,* Wu-Zothek, *through Nug, Yeb, and Idh-yaa, those Architects whom you destroyed and whose elements contributed my greatness!*"

"You are haughtier these days! I destroyed none; I merely opened the gate."

"You *are the Gate! I see this now! You are the* Key *and the* Guardian *of the Gate!*"

"Such was my role from the start. If you know this, why should you and those who follow you go into the door of destruction when there is a better way?"

"*You are the Opener of the Way* for *destruction, for that is what* I *am, not one of your inglorious Firstborn who so readily discarded the decree of your imaginary master, a Nameless Mist, indifferent to the galaxy crumbling under your feeble rule. But you are correct when you say, 'There is a better way!' Soon, through* you, *I will open many gates, and the Blind Dreamer in the Gulf, who first raised me, will rule where all others failed!*"

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[166] It was for this reason that the followers of Typhojem began to refer to him as the "Left-Handed God," though the concept itself is derived from the Left-Hand Path.

With extended wings, Typhojem threw back his tentacled head and roared as he raised the four gems in his hand, unleashing crippling and crackling waves of searing energy. Sizzling bolts of death-dealing current pounded upon the interlinked balls of light that formed Wutzek's body, and before the eyes of the amassed armies of Illathurion, the Celestial shrieked in anguish while his glowing globules dimmed and became opaque until, finally, they burst in a flare of light and ash.

Horrid cachinnation broke forth from the armies of darkness as they celebrated the death of a Celestial. And yet they did not linger there long. The region where Wutzek was disintegrated formed a kind of hollow that came to be called *Aznak*, which some referred to as the "noxious lights" due to the ghastly, corposant fog that arose from the charring of Wutzek that would not disperse. It transformed into a strange, ringed nebula that was avoided by the spawn of the Old Ones who feared the ethereous lights that moved to and fro with a pale, opalescent glow.

Typhojem pronounced the incantation then, "It has come to pass! Past, present, future, all are one in Wu-Zothek! The time is right, when this galaxy is ours, that I shall pass through this gate, which has opened the way for the Lord of All Things, he whose name no lips dare speak aloud!"

So it was that Wutzek came to be revered as an Outer God, though he was not, just as Typhojem came to be held amongst the fell races as the Destroyer, Dark Sovereign, and Father of Destruction. In this, Typhojem was even conflated with the Father of Shadows—for indeed the spirit of that one moved through him—though this was considered blasphemy by the more assiduous servants of the Dark Ones.

With Wutzek eliminated, a powerful light had gone out of the galaxy, and the deadly forces of the Old Ones could now move unhindered through it. From his black chalcedony palace on Garn, Typhojem informed his siblings of his victory and announced that he would plot the final assault on the galaxy and his entrance into the *other* realms now that it's guardian was no more. He instructed the perverse legions of forsaken Illathurion to prepare to move into the galaxy and commanded his greatest lieutenants, beginning with Mhu'anThul, to take the Core Worlds. His supremacy over Skyriver would begin there and spread outwards.

But the defeat of Wutzek had not gone unnoticed, and an aggrieved Horliss-Horliss now came forth to fulfill the commission his father had started.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

BREAKING OF THE BATTALIONS

Pax had for long years been known as the cosmopolitan and administrative heart of the Galactic Union in the Core, for which reason it'd been nicknamed the Hub and Galactic Center. It had survived an attempted hostile takeover by the Federated Worlds of Dorcon and the rocky transition from the Galactic Federation to the Galactic Union. Ten billion Humans and non-Humans made it their home, with most employed in the organization of galactic affairs, as the Union came to govern nearly one fifth of the known galaxy.

All this would change when Chancellor Dal Li Chen began to rule Pax. With deep pockets and deeper connections to the political elite, the charismatic Li Chen spoke to the hodiernal desires of the people, invoking a return to the imaginary glories of old when they'd ruled the Core as masters of their own destiny. His irate speeches and iron-fisted approach were excused as a necessary display of strength that would get things done; his dishonest dealings and mishandling of affairs were chalked up to the common travails of office or lies of the opposition; the disappearance of journalists and illegal profiteering were dismissed as coincidences or just desserts.

Union laws dealing with unaffiliated territories outside of its jurisdiction were tough but fair, as sectors were divided equally amongst Union members to allow trade and expansion to proceed in an organized fashion. Piracy, claim jumping, and poaching were as harshly punished as aggression and exploitation.

Li Chen tried to loosen those regulations, but when his efforts failed, he withdrew Pax from the Galactic Union, a petulant move intended to punish that organization. To stave off public criticism, he played on the old standards of jingoism and fears of dangerous aliens ramped up by AmaraNews—one of the largest Holonet news services on Pax and owned by one of Li Chen's allies—causing the citizenry to believe that his attempt to circumvent or change the law was not for financial gain but concern over Pax's security due to foolish Union idealism and lax policies. Meanwhile, Pax went into political and social isolation, making them more vulnerable to actual outside hostilities.[167]

Around the time the strange ships of the Newcomers (as they came to be called) began arriving over Pax, there was a disastrous collapse of the government building in which the Chancellor's political rivals gathered. There was a short inquest after concerned allegations, but the arrival of a lost Human colony was far more exciting and interesting to the public than a mere accident, and nothing came of it.

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[167] Of the numerous non-Human races then living on Pax, there was growing concern as to where such rhetoric would go, and not a few chose to migrate at this time.

Adding to their eagerness, AmaraNews broadcast the Newcomers' message to the citizenry: "We have heard of your troubles and have come to supply technological and therapeutic advancements, requiring nothing in return but to help our fellow Humans. To prove our good intentions, we bring you the following…" The list of innovations had the expected results, and Chancellor Li Chen was heralded as the man who would bring Pax back to the forefront of the galactic stage.

The populace couldn't be blamed for their enthusiasm. Stories were still told of the Yma and Gree who'd brought them aid many years ago. Still, not everyone was convinced the Newcomers had solely noble motives, and rumors floated of other seemingly altruistic visitors who'd come to another Earthworld, though such talk was laughed off. On the fringes would such chatter have remained were it not for the thin-skinned Li Chen who declared that talk "incendiary and seditious." And when *that* raised eyebrows, he threatened to have the Thirteen Battalions of Zhell begin rounding up "enemies of the state." Of course, this only served to outrage all but his most dedicated supporters.

The Thirteen Battalions had been formed during the unification of the thirteen nations under President Zhell when Humans first came to Notron. As the Galactic Federation had a naval fleet, that left the Battalions to serve as Pax's standing army. Each battalion was made up of twenty-six hundred soldiers and led by a major who was voted in by the soldiers of that battalion. Of those thirteen majors, one was chosen by vote to serve as general. To further ensure integrity, they set up a charter intended to forestall and prevent abuses.

At this time, the general who served was also Major of the Thirteenth. General Jaggar Antarath was a measured man who had won the admiration of most of those who served under him through his evenhandedness and genuine desire to protect the people of Pax. A seasoned quinquagenarian who'd maintained a robust physique and unassuming handsome exterior, Antarath was known for his sense of humor and out-of-the-box thinking.

The Chancellor hated him. As far as Li Chen was concerned, the Thirteen Battalions of Zhell existed to serve as his personal police force. That this had never been the case and was unconstitutional had no bearing on the matter. When Antarath calmly explained these facts to him when he tried to appropriate the Battallions for his use, it only earned him Li Chen's animosity.

The next day, it was reported that anti-Newcomer protesters had attacked the Newcomers. Salacious and contradictory headlines played for a time, but few facts were forthcoming and the "attackers" were killed by the constabulary. The order to imprison anyone speaking against their new allies followed and was expected to be obeyed by both police and the Thirteen Battalions.

This was met with considerable debate amongst the Thirteen. Antarath opposed it on the grounds that it violated their ethics and charter, but the Newcomers were at the peak of their popularity at this time. His own regiment supported him fully, and though he'd later regret this decision, he wouldn't command the other regiments to follow suit—not when it would mean going against the Chancellor and the wishes of

soldiers clearly in the mood to do whatever he asked. The results of the votes cast amongst the other twelve reflected a split in most camps, with the win going to those choosing to follow orders. Antarath was disappointed, but he accepted the results, which left the Thirteenth by itself as conscientious objectors. This was wholly within the purview of their charter, having been designed to prevent the army from turning on the citizenry in blind servitude to a tyrant, an event that had occurred at least once in the distant past.

Few Paxians were familiar enough with the laws governing their lives, let alone the regulations governing the Ancient Order of Zhell. Li Chen saw it as an opportunity to not only rid himself of Antarath and likeminded dissenters but to dissuade the public from following their example. In a move that shocked everyone, the Supreme Chancellor branded the Thirteenth Battalion traitors and secret Notronists!

Antarath had hoped this wouldn't be the course the Chancellor took, but he wasn't surprised, as it confirmed his long-held suspicion that the man was in fact a despot. Swiftly, he led his troops to an underground junction made up of several old and interconnecting storehouses that he and his associates had cleared out years earlier in the event that safehouses were needed if the Galactic Union proved fractious. Secluded and large enough to house his regiment, it also had access to the aboveground to enable the regular procurement of food and supplies—a task accomplished by a rotating shift of soldiers who went out at different times in disguise. Because they were smart, he knew they could operate in the shadows for as long as they needed to.

With the aid of allies in the Loyal Twelve, as the remaining Battalions were now renamed, the Thirteenth met with other groups of dissenters, forming a network that became a resistance. The acquisition of technological resources allowed them to dig deeper into the matter of the Newcomers, confirming their fears that indeed Pax was the object of an illegal incursion, though to what end they couldn't yet fathom.

Knowing that whatever it was, it was their duty to oppose it, they began disseminating their findings to the public through clandestine channels. This only made Li Chen further unhinged, and he ordered local authorities to systematically arrest any who were found in possession of "subversive" material. The public was similarly tasked to turn in anyone suspected of possible collusion. As to the Loyal Twelve, they were given a single mission: track down and eliminate the Thirteenth Resistance.

This did not have the effect Li Chen had hoped for, as the citizenry began harboring suspicion and doubt in the sanity and competence of their Chancellor. To try and offset this, a barrage of propaganda was put forth lauding Li Chen and labeling anyone not committed to progress as "Notronists."

Named for the ancient Taung designation for their world, Notronism began years earlier as a "back-to-the-land" movement before evolving into a collective group of conservationists, environmentalists, and animal-rights activists who advocated for the preservation of oceans, the protection of millions of acres of undeveloped lands as a refuge for beleaguered flora and fauna, and for a halt to the production of toxic chemicals. After several victories, the developers, gaming coalitions, and industrialists grew concerned and launched a public relations campaign that labeled them

"dangerous Notronists." The Big Ulmah consortium, who owned the predecessor to AmaraNews, demonized them almost daily as terrorists opposed to progress and the economy. Entertainers mocked them as the lovers of rodents and smelly swamps. And when the courts could find no evidence of wrongdoing on their part, it was manufactured by means of spies and saboteurs hired to infiltrate their organizations and cause violence and property damage in their name.

So effective had their campaign been that politicians who otherwise believed in the justness of their cause shied away from running on conservation platforms or even mentioning them, save to promote advanced air scrubbers and other technological means of preserving Human expansion in a world growing more polluted every year. The very hint that they might support Notronism was enough to discredit them in the eyes of the populace. What progress the Notronists had made over the years began to be reversed as the movement's leaders were harassed, arrested, or disappeared. So it was that with government support, the natural spaces once again came under assault.

There was another factor at play that worked against those trying to preserve the planet from mass urban sprawl. The advanced technology provided by the Yma and Gree centuries earlier allowed developers on Pax to safely and effectively build not only across but up and above pre-existing structures. As this was taught in the schools and heralded as a great accomplishment, it remained impressive to the growing citizenry for whom the advocates of progress could do no wrong.

Despite their branding as Notronists, the Thirteenth Resistance continued to gain support, but not in all corners. With Jaggar Antarath no longer serving as general, he was replaced by Major of the First Battalion, General Itenn Strom. Strom had served under Antarath and considered him a close friend and ally; nevertheless, he knew that openly supporting him would mean a split in the Battalions. Further, he feared the idea of Pax falling into anarchy more than he feared its burgeoning authoritarianism.

With little success on the part of the Loyal Twelve to hunt down their former brethren, the Chancellor grew more apoplectic: "If you cannot find them, it is because some of you are hiding them! Root out the collaborators and you'll see how quickly they're found!" The morale of the Loyal Twelve had fallen to its lowest point, and General Strom realized it was time to make a stand or lose everything they stood for. "The Battalions are a family," he announced at the emergency assembly he'd called. "We cannot allow ourselves to be torn apart, not even by the Chancellor. Our duty is to the *people* of Pax, to its constitution, and to our charter."

Major Nykh Ekwurn of the Sixth Battalion was disgusted by this speech, but as most cheered, he held his tongue. General Strom's nephew, Major Ekwurn had welcomed the growing authoritarianism of Pax. A capable warrior, Ekwurn did not possess the confidence or good judgement of his uncle and was driven instead by feelings of resentment, hostility, and petty grievances. As far as he was concerned, if the Chancellor declared Antarath and his company traitors, then that's what they were. Behind closed doors, he'd already begun recruiting into his confidence those in the Sixth Battalion that he suspected of having the same beliefs as he did, and now they began recruiting from the other Battalions.

Several months passed in this manner with little change, save for the increased sophistication by which the Thirteenth Resistance escaped detection. The mood on Pax, particularly in the capital, could only be described as dour. The citizens were on edge, upset, and at each other's throats. What had once been a celebratory mood when the Newcomers first arrived had soured into anxiety, anger, and mistrust.

Realizing that he was losing popular support, save from his most ardent followers, the Supreme Chancellor suddenly changed tack. Li Chen offered the Thirteenth Resistance and their allies a truce. "Lay down your arms and publicly declare submission to the rule of law on Pax, and all dissenters, political prisoners, and Resistance members will be permitted to establish a separate colony in one of the old Taung districts."

Word was sent back from Antarath that Li Chen would discuss terms after they turned in their weapons. They were to come to the Basilica Visidia, a monument built long ago in the Necropolis District to commemorate the Massacre of Alashan.

The Thirteenth had not come to their decision lightly. It was most likely a trap to draw them out. But if there was a way to save the languishing prisoners, they had to risk it. Expecting the Loyal Twelve to be there to arrest them or worse, they arrived with an allied force ten times their number.

None could have imagined the depth of the betrayal that awaited them.

Unknown to any but the government's inner circle, which encompassed the political elite, military leaders, and heads of the Banking Clans, the Newcomers were under the command of Mhu'anThul. They had gone to great lengths to hide this fact, having used thralls to interact with the public—an idea borrowed from the earlier actions of the Gormak invaders of Sol. Inevitably, there had been reports of sinister and illicit activities, but with the stranglehold on the media, these never filtered down to the public, who trusted the authorities knew best and had their best interests at heart.

"I need to speak with you in private," Ekwurn said to his uncle, asking him to arrive an hour before the time they were to meet the Thirteenth Resistance. When the punctual general showed up, Ekwurn said, "There's little time. Follow me," and led Strom up the nearby Mount Eclipse, in the area that is now known as Boylan Heights. Mount Eclipse overlooked the necropolis and basilica once been used by astronomers. It wasn't a long hike, but it offered privacy. The lack of maintenance gave it a reputation, while the view of the Polyandrium ensured that it was rarely frequented save by eremites, misanthropes, and cultists during the autumnal and vernal equinoxes.

"You have to choose between the Notronists and the Loyal Twelve," Ekwurn started as they neared the summit. "There is no longer room for middle ground."

"What on Pax are you blathering on about?" Strom returned. A flock of thrantcill flew high overhead. Ekwurn gave them a dirty look. They were considered an omen of bad tidings. "Last I checked, *I* was still in charge of the Battalions."

"Things are changing, uncle! The Chancellor is testing our loyalty." They climbed further up the ridge around a little-used path that wound past taller, liana-covered trees that stretched out narrowly like the rotted fingers of giants, casting forlorn shadows over the hushed silence.

"This is far enough, Nykh. Why have you taken me here?"

"Just a little further. I have to show you something. It's of… *tactical* advantage."

The view from the summit was impressive, particularly at dusk when the chemical composition of the city's smog caught the rays of the sun for a spectacular panoply of ocherous colors that splashed like neon spotlights upon the forlorn basilica and graves of the ancient dead. Just past the borders of the necropolis, Strom could see the stacked rows of hangars that housed the Newcomer ships that had sat parked since their portentous arrival. There seemed to be even more than there had been a few weeks ago. Based on the dark suspicions they had regarding who owned those ships, it didn't bode well for Pax… nor did the fact that government vessels were parked alongside them.

A chill settled on the small clearing as the swaying shadows grew long. It was difficult to see beyond the crooked Natha trees and unwholesome, overgrown bushes that grew like patches of scabbed fur on the head of a stratt.

"Look… this is the deal," started Ekwurn. "If you don't get in line—and fast—you're going to be as dead as the Thirteenth are about to be."

"You're on the wrong side of this, Nykh. Everything the Chancellor has been doing is in violation of Pax's constitution and our own charter. The illegality of his actions is no longer in question…"

"The Chancellor determines the law."

"That's not how it works! He's as subject to our laws as we are. Not even the Chancellor gets to ignore them. You used to believe that!"

"Men rewrite laws all the time," Ekwurn countered. "Besides, where have they gotten us? Weak leaders, endless talk, membership in a Union that puts aliens first while Pax just keeps getting worse and worse. Meanwhile, a war is going on out there, and we don't have the means to defend ourselves in the event that one of those mad Precursor races decides 'Humans are a problem.' The Supreme Chancellor's going to protect us! In fact, he already has!"

"That's where you're wrong! While he's been hijacking our democracy, I've been doing some digging. Li Chen is just a figurehead. His entire administration is a puppet-regime designed to keep the citizens of Pax in line for alien occupation. That's who are on those ships!"

"Notronist lies," Ekwurn spat. "Next, you'll tell me the political elite descend from a line of ancient sorcerers. Who have you been talking to? Where are you getting this? It's Antarath, isn't it? Your old buddy… lawbreakers, both of you!"

"Shut your mouth! Can't you see I'm trying to help you?"

"There was never much love between us, uncle. Don't pretend now. It's beneath you." He had a point, Strom thought. Even as a child, Nykh Ekwurn had been a sneak and a snitch, always envious of what others had, even though he had plenty. He continued to grow up disagreeable, much like his father—a morose and peevish man that nothing or no one could please, including Itenn Strom's sister. Ky had been smart and caring; she did her best to turn Nykh around. It had been for her sake alone that Itenn took him into the Battalions. He hadn't expected the boy to make it, but the military had apparently been his calling. Everyone had been proud of him at first; but time reveals truth, and as word trickled in, his mother and uncle began to realize

that it was the violence that Nykh liked… that he *excelled* in. After she was taken by Plyridian fever, Ky vowed that for her sake he'd never give up on him.

So here he was. "Take a look at this if you don't believe me." Strom pulled out and handed over his datapad. "This is evidence showing that not only are our 'space brothers' not Human, but they're the same race who fought in the wars on the other side. If it's not already, actual rule of Pax will be in the hands of some alien warlord!"

"Why would they bother?" Ekwurn scoffed. "There are plenty of worlds aliens could build on on without having to deal with populated cities."

"I don't know," admitted Strom. "They don't think like us. Or maybe they just take pleasure in building on top of what they've destroyed."

Ekwurn sighed. "Actually, general, you're right."

"So you believe me, then? Good, because we have a lot of work to do… Why are you looking at me like that?"

Ekwurn's expression had gone slack. "That's not what I meant. You sure love calling the shots. Well, not anymore. I thought I could help you, but you're too stubborn. You shouldn't have taken the traitors' side." Ekwurn backed off. He didn't exactly enjoy the look of shock now etched on his uncle's face, but he did enjoy taking him down a notch. "You see, I *know* what's going on. I knew it before you did."

It was rare for Itenn Strom to be caught off-guard. "You *knew*? And you're onboard with this? You *hate* aliens!"

"I do, but I hate Notronists more…"

"You backstabbing worm! I've known you my whole life—"

"Spare me! I'm done with your high and mighty act. You're just like mother. Do you hear that?" he pointed to his right ear. "Those are the ones that are going to kill your precious friends."

When the general turned to look—incredulous at what he was now seeing below him—something crawled out of the bushes. He heard the sound and turned back.

They called the creature the Bonecrusher because that's exactly what it did when it got its jaws on its victim. Their armored bodies and horned heads made them difficult to kill. But as two other specimens stalked out behind the first, *they* weren't what terrified him. Riding atop the Dandrian Bonecrushers were gruesome skull-headed beings straight out of nightmares; they wielded jagged spear-like instruments and ugly serrated shanks. Such weapons were impractical for killing; they were designed for the sole purpose of inflicting pain.

"Run, you fool, before they kill us both," Strom warned.

"I think not…"

Itenn Strom put up a fight better than most would have; he even managed to kill one of the riders with a well-aimed slash across his elongated cranium. But Ekwurn knew, as Strom must have, that it was a futile gesture. The other two closed in, and that was the end. *Perhaps he wanted to go out with dignity*, Ekwurn thought, grimacing, *if such an ugly death could be called that.*

After his uncle's mangled body lay still, the Bonecrushers began to feed, but their riders would have none of that, and with an indecipherable look at Ekwurn, they rode off. Using the tip of his foot, he pushed the remains of Strom's corpse off the precipice,

where it rolled for a few meters before getting caught in the scrubby boscage. With the image of his crimson, eyeless head staring up at him, Ekwurn walked back down the hill, hoping the coming carnage would be swift but knowing it was unlikely to be.

The Loyal Twelve had arrived. They'd been commanded aforetime not to engage, but that didn't stop their anxiety over the coming engagement and growing concern as to the whereabouts of General Strom. Ekwurn commented offhandedly that the general had been invited to accompany Li Chen. That didn't make much sense, but none of this did. Most of them felt internally divided and anguished over what they might be asked to do to their brothers, while others had begun to hear terrible things and worried in their bones if Antarath might have been right all along.

The mood amongst Ekwurn's allies, however, was in stark contrast; they joked loudly amongst themselves, eager to spill the blood of the traitors and give full vent to their revenge fantasies. Finally, they would be given the power and prestige they were entitled to… If that meant bashing in a few skulls, it was worth it.

The arrival of the Thirteenth Resistance doubled their banter and taunts. Antarath was surprised to see Ewurn approach him instead of Itenn, but his hackles were raised further when, instead of answering him, Ekwurn flashed an evil grin and walked past.

Both groups now anxiously waited, watching each other intently across the clearing between their camps. The Thirteenth were making ready to leave when a ship arrived.

The landing of the *Keras*—a nasty spiked thing that more resembled a thalassic monster from the murky depths than a space-worthy vessel—in front of the increasingly anxiety-ridden soldiers marked the signal.

Thousands of Rozzum sprang up from the shadows of the mouldering mounds of the dead: Farleks, Armadids, and the fearsome army of the Zanibar!

The Thirteenth Resistance had never before seen such horrors. But they were professionals and had trained for all contingencies. One would have they had done this a thousand times. Within seconds, they were in formation, weapons draw. If Pax and their loved ones were to survive, they had to succeed. Of course, their own survival was currently was in serious doubt.

Ekwurn shouted furiously to his mini-militia, who took longer to come to terms with what they were seeing, and who's bravado had suddenly dissipated like droplets of water on a scorching day. "Kill them all, or it'll be *us* they come after!" Ekwurn screamed. But even he was unprepared for what came next.

As the armies raced forward, a thing too impossible to behold slithered forth from the *Keras*. The Dweller in the Depths, Mhu'anThul, had left his murky throne in the abhorrent Chambers of Viscera on Xoth to lead his forces in the decimation of Pax. The Lord of Xoth, whose hideous face none could look upon, came crashing in amongst them, wielding his tentacles like a giant cat o' nine tails to slice dozens in half with a single swipe! That a few of his own were also cut down seemed not to bother him.

What can mere men do against such horrors? Jaggar Antarath thought, paralyzed by the sight of it all. But, with a fatal swipe at a coming marauder, he snapped out of it. He could not give in to despair. The Thirteenth Resistance would fight to the very end if they had to… and they would not fight alone!

The Loyal Twelve—seeing firsthand the nightmares before them and guilt-ridden by the consequence of their blind obedience—broke rank and joined the Thirteenth. So too did the citizenry of the nearby towns and cities who'd learned of the meeting from the handful of brave souls who reported the events, leaking live footage over a secure network until even the major newsnets had to pay attention. The people grabbed whatever sharp-edged tools they could find and raced over to help the beleaguered Battalions. Humans and aliens, young and old: all fought side-by-side against the Dweller and his miasmal horde of madness.

The Supreme Chancellor was furious, while his buzzing cabinet, aides, and corporate allies stood in the rearguard, watching breathlessly… some even placed bets.

The battle fought was beyond description. But the ensanguined resistance led by Antarath and the twins, Talus and Tralus, fought fervently, desperate to cleanse their world of the devils that beset it, and with the swelling of the civilians, things began to turn in their favor.

That was when Mhu'anThul released the towering, terrifying Tavarian Dragons, creatures known only from myth, while behind and between their tree-like legs ran the Bonecrushers! None knew how such monsters could be real, but there was little time to consider the implications as they tore into the crowds, swallowing people whole. Regrettably for Ekwurn and his cohorts, the Dweller and his servants slaughtered indiscriminately, distinguishing not between friend and foe, and so they perished at the hands of those they thought would bring them power and glory.

That Pax was doomed was a forgone conclusion. Yet its people did not turn back, run away, or beg for mercy. Piles like sodden hills grew of the bodies of they who fought and died that night, but still they fought on. All would have perished on that grim eve were it not for the arrival of that power who had been sent forth to finish his father's work and end the reign of darkness over a lamenting megacosm.

Horliss-Horliss dropped into the field of battle, smiting the tentacled head clean-off of Mhu'anThul's body, which, as it fell, crushed a phalanx of the Zanibar.

And for the first time since before the battle began, there was silence as everyone turned to look at the odd, amorphous form that now hovered weirdly above them, a being of iridescent color and heliotropic shape shifting viscously. "The Oppressor of Pax and Lord of Xoth is no more," the being's voice boomed.

This sent the Tavarian Dragons racing away into the night, and the Bonecrushers delved deep underground. Any Zanibar or enemy combatant who hadn't yet perished by the finger of Horliss-Horliss boarded and took off in the *Keras*, where they broadcasted the strange turn of events to their allies afar. Stretching out his ectoplasmic *arm*, Horliss-Horliss seized the vessel of Mhu'anThul and crushed it into a dense, perfectly formed metallic ball which yet circles Coruscant to this day….

So extirpative was the Enemy's defeat that day that even the mephitic Night Queen and her Daughters hid, weaving dense tunnels in the labyrinthine lair of the Great Black Nest. Into seclusion as well went the Kindred of Ooradryl. And the spawn of the Old Ones followed suit. Only Typhojem—fired up in a flurry of hate and lust for dominion—grasped his deadly gems and rose up to destroy the defiant Celestial.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

HORLISS-HORLISS THROWS A SHAPE

EPITAPH FOR AN OLD ONE

Horliss-Horliss had long before journeyed to the domain of the Celestials where he'd been transfigured into a glorious member of the Celestial body, learning much in his time amongst them. But the ways of the Celestials are not as the ways of the galactic inhabitants, and the sudden defeat of Wutzek, whom he'd known for but a short while, propelled him to the forefront against the tenebrous hordes of the invidious Old Ones to complete what his father could not.

After smiting the Dweller in the Depths, who was the loathsome offspring of Typhojem, Horliss-Horliss now turned his attention to the Great Priest himself, calling upon the name that Tilotny had first uttered when apprising his repellent form, for Splendid Ap had revealed to Horliss-Horliss all the secrets of the Architects.

In a rush, Typhojem rose from his adamantine throne on Garn to kill a second Celestial, and his servitors rose with him, following him in a train to the noxious realm of Aznak where Horliss-Horliss awaited.

Typhojem yet wielded the Gems of Fury, the crystalized Heart of El'Shuddem, and the Soul-Destroyer that aided him in the destruction of Wutzek, but as he flew to annihilate Horliss-Horliss, the Celestial sprang a trap of his own.

As the wicked Old One hastened forward in all his awful fury, Horliss-Horliss caused Aznak to swirl. Then, he utilized the gems in the foul entity's grasp to create about Typhojem's forces a null inversion, a cosmic maelstrom that set alight the very fabric of aetheric space. Caught between these two inexorable forces erupting as a barrage of torrefying rays within an interstellar storm, Typhojem's minions were rent apart by the maelstrom or pulled into the ring of nothingness that awaited them.

Horliss-Horliss hovered at the edge of the storm. Typhojem glared wickedly at him, refusing to flee or give in to the forces tearing at him. Hatred alone propelled him to strive towards Horliss-Horliss.

It was then that Horliss-Horliss spoke, not to Typhojem but to the imprisoned entities held captive by him: "Arise from the depths, Qixoni, Carnel, Cornus! For you have been set free from your adamant prisms and the prison of the Terrible Old One!"

Two flaming, winged forms burst through the gems he held, and one through the chest of Typhojem. Made of coruscating lights so brilliant and pure they lit up the infinite darkness of space like the blazing sun Quixoni had once inhabited, the resultant expulsion of the Starbird scorched a hole through Typhojem's body as he burned through him.

Typhojem looked down incredulously. And yet the Great Old One raged on, letting out a final agonizing wail that shattered the nearest moons. Then his eyes turned opaque, and the maelstrom of Aznak took him. His body broke into several charred pieces that were now sucked into the null inversion and hurled into odd regions of the galaxy where his various broken parts stiffened in petrifaction.

And so, as the evil of Typhojem passed into the Gates of Chaos, Horliss-Horliss avenged his father and saved Skyriver. As if a sign of the victory over him, there yet remain the Black Hole of Nakat and the Magataran Maelstrom along with an expression that has come down to our day of being trapped between the two.[168]

From his ossified remains, the Killiks formed the worlds of Eol Sha, Golrath, Tisht, and Kessel and its moon that borders the region known as the Maw Cluster, for they believed that good could grow from evil; but his spawn took pieces of his corpse to form Pesegam, Sessa, Qat Chrystac, and Fractalus.[169]

Cultists say that Typhojem is not dead but dreaming, awaiting the day he will be brought to life again by the Secret One to reclaim his infrangible throne on spectral Garn. This myth is perpetuated with different variations by the Thrella and others who worship him. And in the passage of ages, the idea came to extend to Cold Danda Sine as well, who is remembered as Kopa Khan, the god of death and dying… and perhaps that would have amused him.

Long years hence, having read the old tales, Xim the Despot called Kessel Major "Xo's Eye," though the original term was Xoth's Eye, for it was believed to be shaped from the skull of Typhojem, with the glitterstim that runs through its veins his foetid ichor. Legends claimed that the giant spiders that came to make purchase in the deep hollows of his broken skull were so intoxicated by the brain matter of the Dread Sovereign that they spun tales of strange aeons in which deathless Typhojem reigns over the universe alongside others like him. But these are only fever dreams, and the Assemblers do not tell.

WAY OF THE WANDRELLA

Aboard the *Nil-Apharas*, which had pulled itself out of the maelstrom in time, Si'Kranash escaped with three of Typhojem's deadly jewels back to his homeworld of Rennek, for the Heart was lost. Only later would he discover that he and his people were imprisoned by the Elder Signs, those accursed star-stone seals placed upon the Perann Nebula; also called the Red Nebula, having been named for the eerie crimson hues that came to permeate the space in that region.

Though the spirits of Carnel and Cornus had been set free, the gems still contained considerable residual power, and within the Nihil Retreat in the Red Nebula, they were prized as the greatest treasures of the ancient world.

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[168] *Nakat* refers to a "hole in a vessel," while *magataran* means "jeweled."

[169] *Pesegam* means "the weight of winter's sorrow." Korriban means "the baneful era" and "harvest of bone," a reference to the bleached bones of Sith poking out of the sands and the mummies buried in the tombs. The esoteric name, *Moraband*, translates to "the accursed world."

Only the opaque heart of El'Shuddem remained unclaimed, and it now came to find purchase in the depths of Mimban. A potent object, it attracted the Fell Worms of El'Shuddem, including the first of the many Glooths who burrowed deep beneath where the stone lay, as well as Wandrellas, Hssiss, and other dangerous creeping organisms. El'Shuddem's heart seeped into the world, transforming it into a realm of noxious swamps and infested jungles, causing even the atmosphere to grow turbulent.

It is said the Fell Worms of El'Shuddem are devoid of love… that they are part of the Anti-Force and irredeemable, but they had genuine affection for she who birthed them—even as they'd been forced to claw out of her womb—and what love they had imbued the Heart so that it had the power to heal. As the creatures "fed" the stone with their energies and it in turn warmed them, the heart eventually morphed into the likeness of a crystal.

Try as they might, the stout Mimbare could neither grasp nor curtail their planet's transformation, nor were they able to beat back the strange madder and withes that crept upon their buildings and into their homes. Far worse was the barrage of nightmares and internal mutations that began to change those living closest to the epicenter. Rather than endure this plague any longer, they began to seek out other worlds upon which to live. The mutated branch went off to settle a world in the Chi Draconis star system which they named after themselves. The unmutated ones, who would have nothing to do with the mutated, were afterwards known as Rylans, so named for their new world of Rylos, which became the capital of the Star League, a hundred-world alliance protected by an energy barrier designed on the principles of Lucent energy-webs.[170]

The Thrella people came half a millennium later. An evil humanoid race allied with the Sith, the Thrella were drawn by the ominous ether that emanated from Mimban and almost immediately began construction on a multitude of temples dedicated to the many gods of Illathurion, hoping that Mimban would become a host world for the unclean spirits as Drômencas had been. And for a long time, it was.

The discovery of the crystal deep underground called to mind the famous tales of Si'Kranash, and though they correctly ascertained it to be one of the jewels wielded by Typhojem, they mistakenly believed it was the Qixoni crystal which Si'Kranash noted had entered the Great Priest when he destroyed the Qixoni sun and remained in him in crystallized form until his death. But it was not. With much blood spilt, they brought it to the surface and gave it a place of honor in the arms of Typhojem's idol, which was constructed in the Temple of Typhojem with pieces believed to be their god's body, and built above the location where the Heart of El'Shuddem had lain.

This would mark the start of their doom and end of their reign. They had no understanding of it, but the idol of Typhojem stood in opposition to the Heart of El'Shuddem so that in the dedication ceremony that followed, in which tens of thousands of Thrella

[170] This technology was later stolen by Zenetan pirates, who called it the Flax and modified it to turn entire regions of space into invisible ship traps before their depredations led to a concerted push that drove them into the Unknown Regions.

came to the city to celebrate, the priests grew maddened and began taking random sacrifices from amongst the people. Even the king and queen bitterly argued over the right way to arouse the Sleeping God. Typhojem did not awaken, but the maddened people rose up in a fury to slaughter the priests and rulers. In this way did the Thrella become split by bloodshed, which led to their decline into primitivism.

By the end of their civil war, as the Soulworms rose to the surface to feed on their suffering and death, the priests came to realize that the prized object was actually the Heart of El'Shuddem, but none would retrieve it, and they abandoned the accursed temple, save for those in dire straits who required healing at any cost. All the tribes now feared and hated Typhojem, whose name devolved into Pomojema, a third-rate demon-god, and they supplanted his worship with that of their ancestors.

Declaring a truce, they separated; those who'd once supported Queen Mimba became the Mimbanites; those who had supported King Canu became the Coway. And because of the ravaging Soulworlms, who continued to hunt, hungering for something they cannot fathom or fulfil, the worship of El'Shuddem was abandoned as well, and her name devolved into Sheol Nugganoth and Shupnikkurat, the Lady of a Thousand Young and the Lady of the Locust Heart, and it is in this form that she is most remembered today.

The long and troubled years flew by like the Great Wasps across the sorrowful sea, eventually to wither and be forgotten. Mimban's name was changed by explorers to Circarpous V, and the Heart of El'Shuddem became the myth of the Kaiburr Crystal.[171]

The legend of the *Kaiburr Crystal* on Mimban grew over the years. Yet, even those who believed it knew it would be impossible to search Mimban's thousands of ancient structures which managed to remain standing as if by an evil will of their own. Fewer still would brave the infested jungles and swamps teeming with nightmarish creatures. The Force-sensitive Human Mimbanite, Halla, explained little of this to Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa when first she recruited them to obtain the Kaiburr Crystal, but of course she couldn't have known that the treasure she sought was the Heart of El'Shuddem. And the Glooth yet nested deep underneath that brooding and shadowed hieron, growing so immense that its body was said to wind around the planet's core. When Darth Vader fell into its lair a year before the assault on Hoth, one of its many offspring struck out at the one-armed Sith Lord in an expulsion of bloodlust that ended with a weary Vader chopping it into several sanguinary pieces before taking the crystal.

The power of the Heart—which over the millennia had come to have a symbiotic relationship with these creatures—diminished in grief at its loss, though shards from it continued to be harvested in lightsabers and Lumiya's deadly lightwhip.

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[171] In the Earliest Days and well into the Cosmic Wars, sun-crystals were called Kaiburr, which meant "Firebird," "Starbird," or "Sun Dragon," for this Elemental being was the symbol of the Firstborn race. In later years, all crystals attuned to the Force, be they Rainbow gems, Ilum crystals, Corusca gems, Rubite crystals, Adegan crystals, or the many others that existed, were referred to as kyber crystals, but after the Cosmic Wars, even this became uncommon knowledge.

ABADDON UNCHAINED

When Horliss-Horliss brought the War of Temporal Planes to its end, the galaxy was changed. Many peoples had not survived. More were scattered about:

> The wealthy Kanduh of Kaldahan were hunted down by the Doashim and Ghest after hiding their precious Cabirium ore;
>
> The K'kybak, arms manufacturers and dealers, were destroyed by their own hubris when the very stellar converter they sold to the Malmori Empire (named in honor of Malmourral) was turned against them;
>
> The Sixela were destroyed by Malmourral himself when they were caught playing both sides of the war;
>
> The Rhen Varite saw their sumptuous world cast into ice after they thought they could outsmart the Dark Powers they'd pledged allegiance to;
>
> The Sarafurians were strangled in the grip of the Dark Silent One, a maddened Filar-Nitzan of Asmeru who'd earlier been transformed by Abhoth into a revolting Old One known to the Sarafurians as Kuna and Zuma;
>
> The Human Kiilpar were devoured by the cannibalistic giant-kings they served after luring refugees to their world in order to offer them in sacrifice;
>
> The secretive P'Chek were ravaged by the Rakata, who used their genetic material to bring forth the Twi'leks. A remnant fled to Cheku to become the Chekut;
>
> The Eandrill, a chitinous-winged Siniteen offspring, had fought alongside the Judicious until Typhojem turned his sights on their world, leaving only a remnant that became their Worldship. Embittered, they became nonviolent nomads that observe from afar, rejecting gods and intercourse with other races.

Fear filled the teeming multitudes as they trembled before the terrible Horliss-Horliss who had the power to kill one of the Old Ones, and those that could flee scurried back to their worlds and remained there. The odious hordes of Thargorograht nested in shadowy dens to await the instructions of their tenebrous Mistress who would one day beckon them from the woven gulfs of the Great Black Nest.

Horliss-Horliss now soared into Illathurion's dense domain as a great and startling light. Save for Oneirichor, the lands of Illathurion were the strangest in all the galaxies, unrivalled in their phantasmic landscapes, peoples, and cultures. After a rudimentary cleansing, Horliss-Horliss spoke into the minds of all who dwelt there, promising that any who now rejected the desolation of the dark could come into the light and be given a new home and opportunity to start anew. But for the oppression of cruel and mighty suzerains over the many unfortunate kingdoms, the odd residents were hard pressed to imagine where else they might go, for even the weirdest worlds were home, and Horliss-Horliss was terrifying beyond imagining.

All the same, the chance for a fresh start free from the delirium of ravenous kings was too tempting to pass up for some, and denizens great and small responded and came out of the shadows at this time. Horliss-Horliss proved true to his word and—upon their vow to pursue peace amongst themselves and others—opened windows to worlds in Realspace suitable to their needs. These were given aid to begin lives free from the extrinsic bondage they'd known. For some, this proved challenging. After a time, the Con Queecon (or Ranats) of Rydar II fell back on the ideology of conquest; the B'Dellyi were obsequious to a fault; and the Gamorreans, who were a less hostile branch of the Orcus, were inclined to blindly submit to those stronger than they, for which reason a faction departed for Ramoa in the Outer Rim.

To the rest, Horliss-Horliss uttered a warning: "You who have chosen to remain on your strange antemundane worlds, so be it! I am sealing up the adits in and out of Illathurion. Should any of you escape with the intent of bringing harm to those in Skyriver, know this: *Wutzek will return to exact vengeance!*"

At this time, he ignited the Hidden Lights as an enduring symbol of the promise made by the Celestials, and ever after were tales whispered in the darkest depths of Illathurion of the Star Lighters who gave life to the galaxy long before the Ancient Ones intruded on it.

"What guarantee do you give that *we* will not be harmed?" asked the first of three immense arachnid-like beings that crept upon a spiraling silk outcropping that sprung out of one of the many miasmic, silken tunnels that seemed to wind on without end.

Horliss-Horliss, who'd been floating through the Great Black Nest, was impressed by its sheer magnitude. "And who might you be?" he asked of the three massive and indefinable-looking entities with a multitude of eyes and legs.

"I am Princess Wyyyschok, Eldest Daughter of the most ancient and powerful Spirit Queen of the Perpetual Night, Thargorograht."

"And I am Princess Qusothhuga," announced another, "Eldest Daughter of the most ancient and powerful Spirit Queen of the Perpetual Night, Thargorograht."

"I am Targorat, Daughter of the Night Queen," said the third.

"You need not speak to *that* one," Wyyyschok explained haughtily, "for she is a lesser daughter of our Great Mother."

"How many Daughters does the Night Queen have?" Horliss-Horliss asked.

"*Many!*" they hissed and tittered in unison.

"I have heard things told of your people that are not in accordance with the laws."

"You cannot believe the nasty rumors of outsiders who are jealous or fearful of us," Wyyyschok reproached. "Moreover, *our* laws are not as *your* laws."

"Do you or do you not murder your own children?" he challenged them.

"What we do with our offspring is our own affair, Light-Being!" Qusothhuga replied arrogantly.

"So you admit it, then!"

"Yes, I admit it! Deviance cannot be tolerated. *Thousands* have I crushed beneath my feet!"

"Then so shall it be for you!" Horliss-Horliss commanded, shrinking her into that of a tiny creature and sending her to the busiest city on Pax.

Wyyyschok drew back in horror, but it was her sister who spoke. "That was just, for she was a cruel and wicked creature. I hope you will not judge us as all the same."

"I would not," Horliss-Horliss returned, pleased by her words. "But *I* can only guarantee this: if you maintain peace with your planetary and galactic neighbors, neither I nor any of the Celestials shall bring you harm. Can *you* guarantee that you will bring harm to none?"

"You *well* know, Light Spirit, that it is in our nature to hunt for our food; or would you have us *starve* to death?" demanded Princess Wyyyschok dramatically.

"I would have all this foul architecture torn down and started anew," the Celestial admitted. "I do not refer to the Great Black Nest, which is remarkable, indeed, but to the design of the galaxy itself, ruined by the evils of war and greed."

"You speak of prophecies… of days long ago and days long ahead," said Princess Targorat. "Such things have always intrigued me."

"We cannot comment on such things," added Princess Wyyyschok, turning crossly to glare at her sister, "but to say that in this current architecture, our offspring, sisters, and we have the right to live, as do the many who travel the webs of Skyriver undenied."

"Do not imagine that I fail to see through your subterfuge," said Horliss-Horliss, who knew that she harbored many secrets, as was the nature of her mother. "You are not as innocent as you claim. Why have your mother and sisters not also come forth?"

At this she laughed, an unpleasant granular sound that would send the stoutest running in blind panic: "You are a fearful sight even to those who live by the gloom of the blood moons and black suns who swallow the energy of all. I have come forth to request the great mercy that you have so generously volunteered, for Illathurion has grown crowded with our kind, and it is with no small anguish that I watch as my offspring devour one another."

"Very well. You and yours may pass through the door," said Horliss-Horliss, "for I am not without pity for your race. For the time being, you may hunt and fight for food as do others, but if I find you engaging in empire-building, slavery, war, or any unnecessary violence against the innocents of Skyriver as you had previously done—for I have witnessed the deeds of your family as they roved and terrified the worlds—I will see your webs burned and your evil offspring destroyed."

"I have so instructed mine," Princess Targorat nodded in acquiescence.

"Let their black blood be on their own heads!" Princess Wyyyschok consented.

Once the portals were opened, they created a web-bridge upon which thousands of their spiderlings crept across, passing through the door to their new worlds. In this way did the Webweavers (also known as Wyyyschokk and Mind-Spiders) and others come to dwell in the depths of Kashyyyk, Nalyd, Krake's Planet, Dathomir, Naboo, Kirtania, Quethold, and other planets and moons too numerous to mention. And to their credit, many held true to their pledge, but those who grew to gargantuan sizes also grew concomitantly greedy for more than mere food and shelter.

In the deepest, darkest part of the Great Black Nest that was her pride, Thargorograht grinned horribly, for she had sent Wyyyschok and Qusothhuga to the Outside World to prepare the way as only the Great Spider Queens could. Others would follow, including a wicked host led by Moragarom to Lesser Tana.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

SEVEN SEALS

A QUESTION OF BALANCE

"Chosen Ones can fail… or be turned!"

Following supplications to the Supreme Maker in the Grand Convocation of the Celestials within the vast Circle of the Spirit, with the Valdilar and others in attendance, the Osiarch addressed their extended family on Samûnaru as to their preparations for the coming days ahead.

Marutz stated what to most was obvious, but her point was that most had not. She thought of the little Lemur, Katook, who'd managed to save his world Katurrah; and even she hadn't anticipated his people reaching the stars to settle Mygeeto, Maridun, and Krann.

"And if one falls," replied Xurz, "another will arise. Sooner or later, the final one will come from amongst the Suns of Light."

"You speak of they who shall not be named and the war they will inaugurate," stated Horliss-Horliss, who had been active since being granted the role of Wutzek and place on the Council. "I have already imprisoned a particularly pernicious one on Abyssissa, what the Geonosians call Borea."

"Together, we will deal with them!" Lluxos replied.

"That war is yet a long ways off," Marutz said. "I am more concerned with the more subtle war that came in their wake and now permeates the fabric of Samûnaru."

"Not so easy to fight is that," Xurz affirmed. "It is not enough for the galactic inhabitants to survive; they must maintain the balance that is under assault."

"Guardians and Defenders remain," started Lluxos, "but they are too few amidst conflicts that are too many and often clouded by confusion and lies."

"The will of the Supreme cannot be thwarted," Lady Braghlei declared upon her arrival. The Shamaness of the Whills appeared as a bright and many-colored star before resolving into a more humanoid form. "And the Whills will help carry the load until it is done. But with the Firstborn fallen or transferred to our realm, the lost heritage of the Precursors must be reclaimed so as to establish a guiding light."

"And so it shall be," Lluxos replied. "More will be born with the gifts that enable them to tap into the life-force of the universe through the life-force within, be it through bloodline or random selection as guided by the Whills who unceasingly speak to the One Above All." By these things, he referred to what came to be known in various times and places as the Great Mystery, the Sacred Way, the Power of the Cosmos, the Space-winds, the Lifestream, the Life Wind, the Breath, and the Force.

"These adepts will need instruction and discipline to hear and respond in accordance with the light," Marutz added, "for as with all gifts, such power can be corrupted to evil ends, and neither we nor the Father of Lights will rob them of agency."

"We will see they receive it," Lluxos said.

"So will begin the Age of the Tho Yor!" the Shamaness announced.

"And ingloriously ends the Age of the Firstborn," started Elegast, his face a somber mask. "But perhaps it need not."

"You have something further to add, Elegast?" inquired Lady Braghlei.

"Yes," Elegast nodded sagely. "I do not wish to speak out of turn, but I would have us do more during this transition."

"In word and deed, ever have you spoken wisely and true, Elegast," Lluxos noted. "I would hear this suggestion."

Nodding in gratitude, he began: "We might work alongside the Firstborn to repair and rebuild, and thus afford them the opportunity of spiritual reclamation. At the same time, I would establish a closer relationship with the Gifted. Rather than the division that might come of different and competing traditions or years of trial and error, I would serve to teach them how best to use their new abilities for the purpose of serving as Defenders and maintaining the balance; in turn, once they've mastered their gifts, they would teach others, and so would a tradition begin that would counter much of the lies of the Domination System. I wish to personally serve in this capacity, for I have come to have great fondness for the peoples of Skyriver."

At this declamation, Eipha and Niphal volunteered to join him. "So that you do not have to bear this burden alone," Niphal said, "we shall join you, for we too have come to love these peoples."

"The idea is not without merit," Marutz acknowledged. The others agreed.

But the Shamaness narrowed her eyes. "I would hear what precise parameters you intend to use to achieve this endeavour."

"What we need to do cannot be accomplished as a Celestial, Diathim, or Fāta, for that would inevitably lead many to fear or worship us. However, as an incarnate family, they would better relate to us as we set in motion the pattern by which to train adepts."

"The Osiarch do not have long for these spheres," announced Lady Braghlei, much to the surprise of everyone present. "The fall of Wutzek marked the beginning of the end of your time here. How will you three—in the state you will find yourselves in—maintain watch over the cosmic equilibrium?"

"I would discuss this further with you, Lady Braghlei," Lluxos said somberly to her. He then turned to Eipha, Niphal, and Elegast. "What the Shamaness says raises questions. Your plan is noble but presents a great danger to you," Lluxos cautioned, "far more than I believe you know. In material forms, you will have limited powers."

"That is no great obstacle. We will simply maintain the ability to augment ourselves if it is required to daunt an opposer," Eipha stated.

"Or to provide cosmological repairs," agreed Niphal, "for the Firstborn who remain will require our assistance in this endeavor."

"I think you may have missed the full import of what Lluxos is saying," Marutz corrected. "You have never worn limiting, physical forms, nor dealt so directly with the fallen. Your path will prove spiritually, emotionally, and physically draining."

"Lest we forget, we were not made to long endure suffering and violence," reminded Xurz, "for which reason we were permitted departure from the Primary Dimension in the first place to fashion realms of our own imaginings."

"To mitigate these effects, I propose that our attributes be shared amongst us," offered Elegast. "In this way, we will more directly provide succor for one another and truly set the example of a familial union rather than as domineering masters. Eipha can embody fortitude; Niphal wisdom; whereas I shall embody justice. The Force itself will embody love for us so that we shall maintain the balance. Additionally, we shall dwell upon a world of our own, a world of *life* connected to the galaxy yet apart from it so that we might better find rejuvenation and rest."

The Osiarch granted that this was a wise course, particularly since they'd just learned that they were themselves to depart Skyriver at some point in the near future.

"*We* are uncertain as to this course," Lady Braghlei acknowledged, "but since you are all in agreement, we shall provide you a Wellspring of Balance. Its waters will flow from Isorropía, one of the four Sacred Worlds from which the Wellspring of Life flows into the galaxy. It will afford your mortal bodies great refreshment."

"In accord with this, a Font of Power shall be brought to you from Frivoli." This promise was made the Green Wizard Carolinus, known colloquially as Greensleeves. Bordering the larger Realm of Dream and Skyriver, Frivoli held the reified substantiation of the Cosmic Clock, which was externalized at the edge of the Deep Core around Diatia Major, as fashioned by the Diathim, and internally protected by Carolinus and two other Wizards who governed the realm. "Beware of overusing it—for it has already corrupted one of our own." There had been a fourth Wizard, but Greensleeves had been forced to stop the Dark Wizard Synonamess Botch, along with the nightmare army he'd raised.[172]

"So too shall a Pool of Knowledge be brought to you from beyond the veil," added Cherlindrea of Andowyne, who was known in their sphere as the Fairy Queen. "It also must be used in balance…"

"Ensure that the pool and font are untainted by *others*," the Shamaness warned them, looking pointedly at Cherlindrea, "*especially* Humans." Then, directing her comments to Elegast and his companions, she continued, "and know that their powers are not trifling, and that they are meant for you *three* alone."

"We shall permit none besides us to imbibe," Elegast assured them.

"So it shall be," said Lluxos.

"So it shall be," returned the Grand Convocation of the Celestials. This officially ended the meeting, though several remained behind afterwards to converse.

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[172] Botch's son, Commander Borf, managed to escape with a weapon he'd developed that could infantilize Humans. Despite the best efforts of Terra II's Space Command to stop him, it is believed his efforts were successful, though no discernable difference was ever detected.

"You are troubled by something," Elegast noted, approaching the Shamaness in private. Eipha and Niphal, overhearing Elegast's concern, joined them.

"We have had a vision," Lady Braghlei replied, "but I am not certain it is beneficial to share it with you. It is not *pleasant*."

"Pleasant or not, if we were the subject of this vision, I would think we were meant to know it," reasoned Elegast.

"Very well, then. You will maintain the balance for long years, but a time will come in which you will fail to choose wisely, causing that which you love to sink in an ocean so deep, no ray of light in Samûnaru will be able to penetrate its depths."

The three who were to become known as the Ones were troubled by this prophecy, but Eipha ever after harbored resentment against her for saying it.

At this time, they departed. On the Hidden World of Vitae, in a dimension between Realspace and the place Beyond Shadows known as the Ethereal Plane of Atrii, the Whills brought forth the Wellspring of Balance.

From the Wellspring of Balance, Elegast incarnated. He became known as Father.
From the Font of Power incarnated Eipha, who became Son.
From the Pool of Knowledge incarnated Niphal, who became Daughter.

After the end of the War of Temporal Planes, they announced themselves before the Elder Races as the True Architects who had come to help them rebuild the galaxy, reiterating the promises of the Celestials earlier expounded by the Pelgrin and the need to restore and maintain spiritual balance.

CHAINS OF FIRE

Lluxos called to Horliss-Horliss, and together with Xurz and Marutz they entered the deepest parts of the Forbidden Regions, four great lights in an infinite sea of night to oppose the ruinous powers now swirling within the rotting interior of the Gunninga Gap. Like a sentient abyss intending to swallow all light in the universe, the Eldritch Ones fed upon the surrounding worlds, gaining power in the gloaming darkness. For their part, the Celestials knew that such concentrated evil could only belong to beings of entropy itself, for not even the Old Ones, save perhaps Mnggal-Mnggal, emanated so singular a signature—*ad nihilo*, a void in the Force.

Lluxos knew too well of the Ancient Ones and had designed Skyriver in the hopes that it would be a place of refuge from them. But he also knew that their paradise would be short-lived, for the too-long tendrils of the Enemy seeped into all places.

As one, the four joined in soul, spirit, and mind and began a melodious threnody. This brought forth strains of music hereby unheard in composition and tone, borne of deepest melancholy and primordial power. The lure of it was inexorable, and it caused time and space to bend and turn into cosmological knots. It was not the first prison the Celestials had wreathed for such ones… but it would be the last.

Nameless, eldren shapes of fire…
Death's exhalation, vacant of grace,
Bound in old irons of earth and sea,
Be now confined in time and space,
Until that far day when all life soars free,
And Shadows burn upon the pyre…

In fury did those black spirits of the Unending Dark roar and shriek… all in vain, for none could escape the coils of space-time freezing around them, and so they were stilled. "There, the Impotent Ones will remain immobile in time for ages of the stars," said Lluxos, "leaving their lesser thralls to fight for dominion."

"Totems…" Horliss-Horliss stated. The word hung uncertainly in the air.

"It is for this reason that the shadow is their most predominant form," Lluxos said at last, "amorphous adumbrations of light behind which one or many might operate, blighting the spirits and minds of those to whom they whisper. I would like to believe we have chained all of their fiercest sultans, but that would be naïve, and it is known that in other realms, they have other forms that abound."

From this vast unhallowed space now sealed by the expansion of the Still Curtain sprung the strangeness that is the Unknown Regions. The Shadow Worlds and Dark Worlds were now closed off by the Red Nebula, the Valtaullu Rift, the Gunninga Gap, the Twilight Void, all a tangle of hyperspatial barriers that made the far Galactic West all but unnavigable. Ever after, time would move strangely there.[111]

For travelers attempting to navigate deeper past the Rakatan Archipelago, Zakuul, Csilla, and the shallowest regions at the border where the side-effects of the ever-

increasing space-time seal could be felt, the hyperspatial disarray would become harder to navigate and more deadly until it was near-impossible to proceed.

Should any penetrate towards the capital world of those who would later be known as the True Sith, they would find decaying cities of the depraved, ruined worlds of mouldering monstrosities and ghouls who hunt without masters, and other things too terrible to regard that seek only to torment and consume. Were such unlucky explorers to press beyond that, they might come upon the decaying and obscene kingdoms of the damned, the ever-expanding orders of the obscene, mantic cults and cruel peoples that bow at the feet of demiliches. There go the royally ceremented corpses, the ruling mages long past concern for mundane matters, with sanious orbs aglow in empty sockets gazing out at the cosmic sepulchers of sanguinary, sacrosanct gods in deepest space, listening with ears that long ago crumbled to dust for furtive whispers that emanate out of the tenebrous void.

Yet even the most ardent suzerains dare not approach too near to that abominable bourne in the Gunninga Gap, as had the unwise who flitted to the nethermost black flame, who looked upon those unhallowed faces envisaging their coming empery; for to do so is to die slowly as exanimate, friable corpse-things sucked of all mind, spirit, and flesh.

FORBIDDEN ZONES & ENGINES OF DEFENSE

While older Cosmic Turbines were retrofitted, newer marvels of the age were crafted, such as the one in the Vultar system of the Core Worlds. Many were made for obscure purposes known only to their makers, such as the Biomass of Rigel in the Outer Rim… or the enigma that yet surrounds Ciratu in the Immerian Outback of the Expansion Region called the Ciratu Spheres, which are six moon-like objects composed mainly of iron, each of which contains a labyrinth… or the five whirling stars of the Quintarad in the Void of Aogros, far off in Wild Space, engineered by shifting the position of the stars known to the inhabitants of the Uncharted Territories as the Five Pulsars, which the Trianii believe are intended to imprison malevolent deities.

Fascinating tales tell of the Inner Rim's Penegelen, a giant, artificial world enclosing a star that powers its energy, and the Ianane Ringworlds of Wild Space have sagas all their own. As to the Diatian Clockwork located in the Southern Core, it is an external apparatus of the Diathim's Cosmic Clock which exists in another form in Frivoli, calculating a time that no mortal can reckon, reading the alignment of the stars, and counting the years to the Restoration.

The Still Curtain that surrounds and bisects the galaxy, sealing off the Unknown Regions, protecting Skyriver from within and without, is the most complex and powerful barrier built to keep malevolent forces at bay in much the same way that the Veil of Alpheridies, Red Nebula, and Stygian Caldera hold fast ancestral Sith worlds. So too the Chiloon Rift imprisons the remnant of the Shadow Kings; the Tascollan Nebula and Nilrebmah Configuration confines the spawn of the Old Ones; the Kathol Rift and Launch Gates closes Demonsgate from Otherspace; and Mortigan holds Mnggal-Mnggal… for a time.

The erstwhile secrets of the Engines of Defense had been shared with only a few trusted beings in the sectors in which they were housed, and they would pass them on to their offspring or trusted elect. As semi-sentient constructs of Force-based technology, these could be wielded only by those who met the criteria as set out by the Ones; though, in later times, some would find ways around this provision.

The Killiks and others of the Elder Races had assisted the Ones in repurposing the arcane Engines of Defense to serve as seals over the western quadrant, a vast territory ruined by some of the worst fighting in the Cosmic Wars. The systems, sectors, and regions of the Galactic West were subsequently referred to as Forbidden Zones, Forbidden Space, and the Forbidden Regions, and it was early in the postwar era that the Firstborn prepared and distributed a map of the galaxy for its inhabitants with the final instructions of the Celestials: "Do not enter the regions and zones that have been demarcated as *forbidden;* these are comprised of the Outer Reaches and other spaces that have been sealed off by us, for they are an oubliette for those hostile nations that had fought on the side of the Enemy, who would yet see you destroyed. In the centuries ahead, our names will be forgotten and knowledge of us will cease, and once again the galaxy will turn against what is wise, but our signs will remain. And some of you will burn as bright candles on a shore that has known only night, and though the cold winds rage against them, these lights will not be doused until we have returned. Stay in the light, for though many will perish in the spreading dark, we will never forsake you."[173]

In the Twilight Wars, which lay millennia ahead, several of the star-stone seals would be weakened just as several ancient gates would be opened and new ones built. As the Elder Gods were forgotten and more people began to traverse the Outer Reaches, they became known instead as Unknown Space, the Unknown Territories, Uncharted Territories, and Unknown Regions; though less than a sixth of Skyriver's total mass, the Unknown Regions amounted to three quarters of all stellar space, as it included stellar clusters, satellite galaxies, and systems in the galactic halo.

And there were yet Infernal Gates and other forbidden portals to the Charnel Worlds, but the seals placed on those realms rendered these one-way trips. Mercifully, most of the illicit portals are forgotten and now lie in dust… though some passages were never quite barred, and when the old gate at demon-haunted Garn was aeons later discovered by the High Shaman of the Terrible Glare, he used it to call forth entities from the dark.

FROM CORUSCANT TO CORELLIA

In the reorganization of the galaxy, several solutions were employed to deal with refugees from worlds that were no longer habitable or in existence. Horliss-Horliss and the Ones saw fit to transfer colonies aboard Great Interplanetary Arks to new

[173] Amongst those lights that remained in the Unknown Regions were the Klakar and the Calatians, each of whom presented a formidable bulwark against hostile powers.

worlds. Humans, near-Humans, and their allies who'd fought on the side of the Judicious during the Cosmic Wars were offered homes by and alongside alien races, such as on Altor in the Altora system (known as the Epsilon Erandi system) by the Creon, Tarn, and other fellow Humans.

Several races recalled the value of cooperation that had been lost during the wars and bonded together to protect one another. Such was the case for the Tocoyans, Ktilac, and Murachaun, who formed a confederacy to protect the one hundred ninety-two systems of the Ktilac Regions, which opened up three of those systems to refugees. The twenty-three worlds of the Carousel in the Mere system had been brought about by the Pa Tho, Krevaaki, and Eellayin to aid refugees from the Earth-worlds. It was later known as the Spica system, a satiric name given for the primary trade that made the colonists who populated its worlds wealthy by the intergalactic selling and smuggling of drugs, which was first dubbed *spice* even before the Second Breath. The infamous Bank of Spica also started there.

Pax—which had been renamed Coruscant following the end of Chancellor Li Chen's reign—took in refugees, as did other Core Worlds, though some Humans resented this and recalled a fabled time in which they were the planet's sole occupants, having forgotten that Coruscant was originally Notron and had belonged to the Taung upon whom was waged a genocidal war. But the exiled Taung did not forget, remembering it ever after in song and legend.

And though Li Chen was dead, there were yet others vying for power, all of whom had been guilty of collusion in one way or another. The Celestials would not get involved in political disputes, save to counsel Coruscant of the dangerous path they had forged, a warning that was heeded for but too short a time. Wanting to leave behind the memories of horror and death, the survivors of the Thirteen Battalions of Zhell and their allies petitioned the Ones to find them a new world.

Enter the immense World Puller, which the Killiks called *Qolaraloq* and Humans called *Centerpoint Station*. Horliss-Horliss provided it a small sun (later called *Glowpoint*) to power the semi-sentient station's nuclear, magnetic, electric, tractor, and Hyperspace energy systems. Serving as a protective forcefield and intricate tractor beam, it took control of three uninhabited moons and five planets from Coruscant's system and transported them to a sparsely inhabited sector within the Core. As Coruscant was the origin point for several of its astral bodies, it was believed by some that the system, star, and its primary world were named "Little Core" after it. In fact, the Killiks named it after their sister race, the Q'rel, who had redeemed themselves and gone to ground on Kathol, and the Galactic Union called it *Corella*. But in an odd bit of synchronicity, it had a secondary meaning, as it had already been named for Antonia Corelli as they would soon discover, and so, *Corellia* it became. Two valiant races who had seen their homeworlds devoured at the end of the Empyrean Wars were the Drall and Selonians, and these were given two of the five worlds, called the Five Brothers, upon which to settle (though a few went to Lesser Tana).

So impressed were the Ones by the Duchess of Drall, who opened the borders of her worlds to any in need, that Elegast accepted her invitation to impart wisdom to her people and reiterate the ancient prophecies and promises of the Celestials. And so she came into possession of *The Celestial Record*.

Upon the Five Brothers, the Battalions went to live. Jaggar Antarath, who lived long enough to see the battle's end and marvel at the miracles that had occurred, named them Talus and Tralus after the deceased twin leaders of the Thirteenth Resistance who'd saved the lives of so many others and led the charge against Mhu'anThul. He saw to it as well that the heirs of Itenn Strom were well looked after.

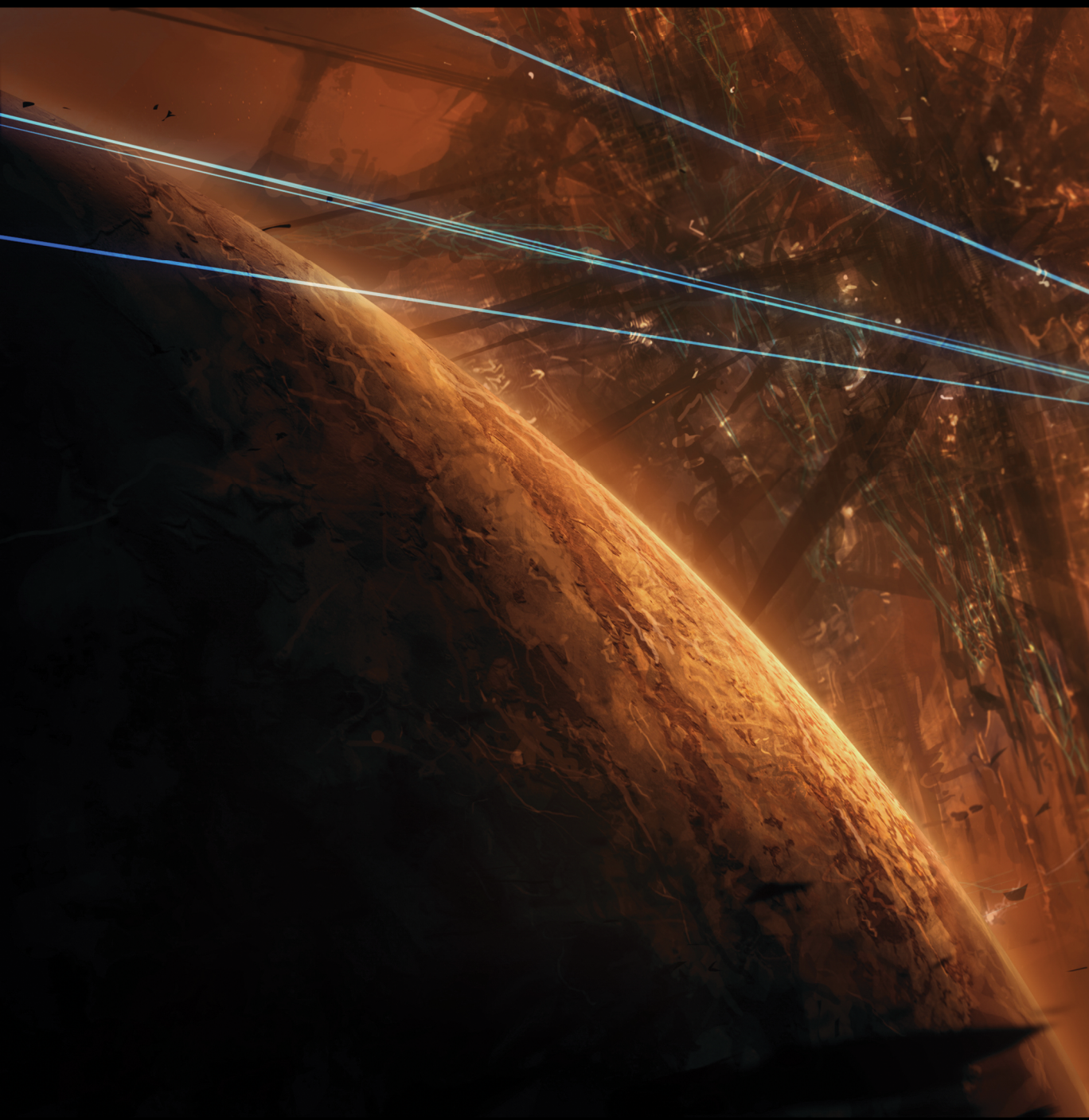
Of the Sith-Human descendents who'd long ago established themselves on Pax, they moved surreptitiously amongst the celebrants, pretending to rejoice with them. But a crucial mission had been sent from their masters: "Maintain positions of authority or regain them if lost, for Coruscant will be ours again when the Sith bring back the Taung to retake their ancestral home. Send a task force to bring the skull of Mhu'anThul to Korriban."

The Sith knew the Taung would not easily ally with them, for which reason the Sith established a small community by the Roon Sea in a region they called Nime upon the planet Roon, biding their time while the Chamonaar they'd brought from Champala and the Kalak from Kalakar Six were sent out to ravage Jaudere, Tauntoom (later Tawntoom), and Nugnurra (later Nunurra). Then, after they'd done sufficient damage, the Sith would enter the fray, kill the Shamunaar (as the Taung called them), and make the case that they should fight with them against the Humans to reclaim Notron. Of course, once the world was theirs again, the Sith would enslave or eliminate the Taung.

The Taung on Roon had been in the midst of cultural and political upheaval. It was decided to keep the Council of Chieftains over a sole ruler, but the female sect of the priestly class opted to form an independent group, asserting that they could accomplish more good by cutting political ties so as to better follow their calling without compromise and institutional allegiance. With their innate powers, the Warriors of Shadow became the fierce adversaries of the Shamunaar and Kalak, but their renown came from their integrity and courage.

The Taung had proved far hardier than the Sith thought. So three ambassadors came to the Taung capital of Tauntoom during their solstice festival to make their appeal before the Council of Chieftains, who were having a meal whilst enjoying a fanciful performance by the Warriors of Shadow. Once it had concluded, the Sith made an impassioned plea as to how they might together reconquer Notron with the formidable forces of the Sith by their side. But after consulting with the wary Warriors of Shadow, the Council rejected the offer, explaining that they would never forget the betrayal on Notron, but nor would they go backwards, take revenge, or meddle in the affairs of others outside of their domain. Roon was now their home.

So were the Sith forced to return to think up a different scheme.



CHAPTER SIXTY

HAIL, SONS OF HENDER!

SECTION I: EXODUS

THX-0001
2178 NE

Within the Electronic Labyrinth, buried a mile beneath the Urthhan soil, lived a population of over twenty thousand men, women, and children. The previous generation has endured considerable hardships. But now, with internal conflicts, labor disputes, and a war raging on the world above, those who were in charge of the facility handed over control to the artificial intelligence mainframe to come up with and help enforce "ideal solutions" to their mounting problems. To ensure no competing narrative spoiled the one it needed to invent, its first order of business was the purging and prohibition of literature, music, and film from the outside world deemed unacceptable, permitting only pre-vetted materials that did not contribute to unruly behavior and deviance from the established harmony.

This prompted the first rebellion, a quiet one, with bibliophiles and art aficionados hiding and distributing whatever physical media they could salvage. Digital media was another matter since it was much more easily detected and scrubbed.

Dale Hender was aghast at all of it. He'd never been what one would call radical, but he recognized the violation of everyone's natural rights and the message that was being sent. Furthermore, his father had just died, purportedly in a work-related accident, but as Terrence Hender had been amongst the few to speak out against the A.I.-led authority, young Dale suspected otherwise.

So Dale kept his head down and did what he was told for the time, serving as a model citizen while secretly trading illicit material with those of similar minds whom he trusted—a growing group who coined themselves the "Sons of Freedom."

One of these was Randall Vorne. Working as an analyst, Randall was in an ideal position to covertly apprise them of the stringent regulations coming down the pike. Sitting at his terminal hours after the last shift had ended, he showed Dale the screen: "To create a culture of conformity that's easier to control," he read in a whisper, nervous that anyone might overhear but determined to do his part, "we will begin issuing identity badges that everyone will wear on their person, utilizing numbers instead of names. Medications will be prescribed and enforced to keep laborers healthy and focused on work. The various faiths will be diluted into a single innocuous religion that maintains conformity to the will of the state."

"They can't possibly get away with this!" Dale exclaimed too loud for Randall's liking.

"It gets worse!" he continued after hushing him. "Listen to this part: 'To prevent overpopulation and deal with depleting resources due to the frequent disruption of shipments, reproduction will be strictly regulated. Citizens will be restricted to copulation only as the need arises. To satisfy base Human desires, mechanical and/or manual methods will be encouraged.'"

"They've gone insane!" Dale replied, half in shock.

"As if those aren't bad enough, a measure is being discussed that will see our heads shaved, allegedly to deal with the problem of lice!"

"Not my head!"

"Our new computer god is bent on dehumanizing us! We have to do something, and it had better be quick… You're slated as number as 0001 of the THX series!"

"*What?* Let me see that!" Dale, who had had some training in computer analytics, took over the keyboard. "It's being called a reward, purportedly for my model behavior—but more likely because of my father." Dale shook his head, scared and upset but also frustrated that he couldn't think of a solution. "What does THX even mean?"

"There are other code-designations, but none are decrypted in the file. If I were to guess, *The Human Experiment*. Listen, I have people I can talk to. I don't know for sure, but they might be able to help."

"How long before this all happens?"

"A month for the identity badges," Randall stated, shaking his head. "Each subsequent month will see another new law enacted."

"Can you delay it?"

"With the A.I. monitoring everything, there's little anyone can do."

"They could be monitoring us right now!" Dale gasped.

"Not yet," Randall assured him. "It'll be at least a week before it takes over the autonomous branches of the system."

"There's a lot to do before then. We won't go down without a fight!"

Almost overnight, the Sons of Freedom became more than a club. They transformed into a movement that gathered in secret to discuss plans of escape. After several meetings, Randall introduced them to Antonia Corelli and her boyfriend, Paxton Solo, pilots who ferried food into their complex from colony worlds in space. Corelli and Solo were not fans of the current arrangement, but after Randall informed them of the coming austerity measures, they volunteered to help in any way they could, informing the nervous but determined group that they needed to be thinking bigger, escaping not only the underground facility but Urthha itself. In this way, they couldn't be recaptured and brought back. Although dismayed, the Sons of Freedom agreed and began spreading the word. They would join the colony on Alpha Centauri, descendents of freedom fighters from the famed *Lucy B. Davenport*, a group whose political allegiance to Earth could be described as tenuous at best.

It was Randall who announced that the A.I. had grown suspicious. The launch schedule had to move up. By the time they were required to depart, there were over five thousand ready and willing to go. Paxton and Antonia's vessel, the *Oort Raider*, was a primitive, ten-kilometer long converted mining ship. It could fit them and more.

No one knew how their plan was discovered, but it wasn't hard to imagine spies or someone who, out of fear or misplaced loyalty, thought it advantageous to turn them in. When the first android police arrived, they were easily taken down. When a legion of them arrived, death and capture followed. Were it not for those who sacrificed themselves so that the majority could get out—whose names were later given a place of honor aboard the *Oort Raider*—things might have gone very differently.

If takeoff was harrowing for those who'd never before seen the sun and stars, it was a wholly terrifying experience to come under attack by Urthha's robot mining ships, which employed mass drivers to hurl asteroids at them. Although the *Oort Raider's* smaller auxiliary ships made short work of them, calming the riotous crowd took some time. It was while they were later celebrating their escape that they discovered the ship had been dragged off course, and when they spotted what appeared to be a rogue black hole, their immediate instinct was to panic.

Despite all of Paxton and Antonia's considerable skills, they were unable to skirt around or evade its inexorable pull. But as they were drawn nearer, they saw it was a malfunctioning Jumpgate that should've been dismantled years before. Rather than risk further damage, which they'd suffered attempting to break free, the pilots conceded to pass through the wormhole, figuring it would lead them somewhere habitable where they could at least make repairs and get back on track.

They couldn't have known that the Jumpgate wasn't there by accident.

On the other side of the gate, they scrambled to get the coordinates to where they were, silently grateful they were near enough to an uninhabited world with a breathable atmosphere. But no sooner had they landed that an argument broke out amongst the passengers as to whether they should turn back. Most were intent on continuing on their way to Alpha Centauri while another vocal group demanded on settling what appeared to them to be a verdant and veritable paradise.

Before this option could be seriously considered, three unknown ships appeared as if out of the blue and landed not a kilometer distant. The news was not good. Two belonged to Rodian slavers who held in their hull a thousand captured Bith. Even more disturbing was they were guarded by a two-headed nightmare called an Eborsisk. The terror-stricken Sons of Freedom, having never before seen aliens, let alone monsters, were soon herded up.[174]

The Rodians came for them with weapons drawn. Some ran. They sent the Eborsisk to retrieve them. Most were lined up and numbered. Antonia took advantage of the opportunity to befriend a Bith named Laximas who could speak their tongue, and together they came up with a plan to overcome the Rodians and free the slaves.

And so it might have gone had not the third ship then arrived, crewed by fierce and experienced Gamorreans. Rather than fight the Rodians over the hefty score, the two slavers negotiated to split their quarry, including the Humans which would fetch a high price. While they were haggling, Paxton freed Antonia, Dale, Randall, and Laximas, and together they seized and stole the Gamorrean ship.

[174] Ironically, a small Wookiee colony lived in the forest right above their former prison on Urthha.

There are many who underestimate Gamorreans, believing them unintelligent and clumsy. They are not. Norgk, the Gamorrean leader of one of the most prominent clans on Gamorr, radioed the ship, calmly threatening to murder the slaves if they did not return. Antonia countered that he'd never hurt their profits, but Norgk had anticipated her response and ordered the murder of hundreds of Bith and Humans.

Aggrieved and defeated, and unable to hit back without hurting more slaves, the fugitives returned. Norgk was a pragmatist and would not pass on the opportunity to teach the slaves the price of revolt. He raised his blaster to kill Laximas. Antonia would have none of it. She tackled the Bith and took the shot intended for him.

As if things couldn't get any worse, a massive ship arrived. This was the employer of the Rodians, who did not fully trust them and occasionally did spot-checks to ensure they were bringing them the full cargoes. The Gamorreans were not pleased, as they were their own bosses, but he knew the Varlian Empire were not to be trifled with. Norgk prepared his people to fight the insectoids if they tried to interfere. But the Varlian Empire had not risen to power by being fools. Quickly assessing the situation, the leaders offered Norgk and his clan regular employment in exchange for their catch. Their remuneration too good to pass up, Norgk agreed.

So it was that the Sons of Freedom became slaves once again, and as they departed the edenic world for Forhilnor, the third planet of the Beta Hydri system, Paxton Solo and his friends agreed that one day they would escape and return to this world and name it in honor of Antonia Corelli.

FORHILNOR AND THE CALCULATING GODS

The Varlian Empire was the government of the Vulagool, a strong and crafty bipedal insectoid race who'd come to serve Thargorograht in the Empyrean Wars. Their capital had been established on the green world of Varl in the Ardos system under the comfortable rule of Emperor Varlia. Things went well enough until his failure to enslave the Wookiees, at which point he and the populace were punished and infected with the Changa Bloodrot, a plague that killed an entire third of their people and lessened their status in the galaxy.

The next several emperors would not fail. During the War of Temporal Planes, their suzerainty was expanded to other worlds, including Daltharg, Forhilnor, and Vhorlin—which had been abandoned and was now renamed Varlinaar. But it would be on Forhilnor that a new repository of slaves was established. Due to the presence of a densely packed cluster of red suns, coined Bloodstars, which made the world difficult to access, Forhilnor was safe from enemies and allies alike.[175]

Forhilnor's natives were a friendly, technologically-advanced, six-legged race with two mouths and eyestalks. They had not resisted the conquest of their world and instead offered their services to the greatness of the Varlian Empire, who put their new servants to work in building them a fleet of ships. It was not cowardice that motivated

[175] Varl and Varlinaar derive from *Varleg*, which means "Spring-like." Daltharg is "Place of Valleys."

them as the Vulagool assumed. The Forhilnor were biding their time, having seen their salvation in a vision imparted to them by the Eye of Clarity, an artifact they believed came to them from the Celestials. How this might occur was something they kept secret. They allowed the Vulagool to reduce them to second-class citizens and send them into the mountains and other less hospitable lands from which they were tasked to bring monthly tribute.

With the help of the newly employed Gamorrean slavers, the Vulagool were able to increase their slave populations. In addition to their Bith and Human chattel, they subjugated Ithorians, Kubaz, Ortolans, Kitonaks, Togruta, Mon Calamari, and Sullustans. And so the centuries passed.

Five hundred years after the Sons of Freedom had been enslaved, the ruler of Forhilnor was Governor Kaxa. With Rodians and Gamorreans still working as slavemasters, he tasked his labor force with the completion of a project his forefathers had long ago started for the purpose of honoring Thargorograht, a massive fortress then known as the Tharraht Temple. Kaxa's interest in it was far from religious. He called it the Stone Temple.

Mecress was his unofficial advisor. A sorceress with the gift of seeing into an individual's past, Mecress was a Muabite of Muabis and descendant of the ancient Lamiae. She put her powers to singular use when she told the past, knowing that this impressed every king and queen. She knew to be selective in this, pointing out only the most flattering things, such as conquests and romances won. As to the future, she could see nothing, discerning only that *if* certain events played out a certain way, they had a probability of producing certain results. Her skills were well-rewarded. This would've been sufficient for many, but not her. She wanted much more.

From her prior master, a vicious Kissai king from some half-forgotten Sith world, she'd learned the hidden location of the rare *Stone Book* and craftily proceeded to procure it. Before departing Millinar, she tested one of its spells on the king himself. Persuaded by his tortured, desiccated corpse that the book was authentic, she departed for greener pastures. She came to Forhilnor and found in Governor Kaxa someone as ambitious as she. With the *Stone Book*, they could accomplish two audacious goals:

The first would utilize the Stone Temple which, under Kaxa's instructions, had been re-designed as a planetary magnetic resonance device that would harness the life-force of the slaves as fuel to transport Forhilnor to Varl. The energies funneled through the Stone Temple would not only move the planet under the direction of its bearer, Governor Kaxa, but channel through him, transmuting him into a veritable demigod. The god-king would then set loose his forces to storm the Imperial Palace on Varl, kill its emperor, and rule in his stead. After this, he would expand his dominion to other worlds until, at last, the Varlian Empire was unstoppable.

That was when Mecress' private plan would begin. She would encourage *Emperor* Kaxa to deal with the Sith Empire. Once they were decimated, she would make her move and ascend to her rightful place as Empress of the Sith and destroy any who stood in her way, including Kaxa if he tried to thwart her!

The key to all of this hinged on the fabled Crystal Rider.

"Your previous attempts all failed because you lacked the proper focusing crystal," Mecress informed the Governor. "But this one is special—embrued with great power!"

"I should hope so," Kaxa replied. "It had taken no small effort to secure it." By this he meant stealing it from the place of honor afforded it in the Gree temple on Ilum. It was now placed in the Locus Chamber at the inner base of the Stone Temple.

What Kaxa and the sorceress failed to comprehend was that this was no mere crystal but Orax, the last of the Crystal Riders in Skyriver. Not that they would have cared, but they would have taken greater precautions to ensure her competing will was thwarted. And that will was now centered on Cosmo Hender.

A descendant of Dale Hender, Cosmo had shown himself intelligent, gentle, and dutiful, and so he'd been chosen to serve as a pet to Governor Kaxa's pregnant daughter, Lady Delba, who took him as her companion. Her father hadn't particularly liked the idea, but he loved his daughter in his way and often indulged her.

Living in the Royal Palace meant that Cosmo could not spend as much time with his pregnant wife Sallee, but it also meant certain benefits, such as being taught to read and write, a skill he passed along to anyone willing to learn. And because he held greater freedoms than other slaves, Cosmo was in an ideal position to become one of the leaders of their secret Freedom Guild.

After centuries of subjugation, the nine slave races had learned docility and taught their offspring the same, but they had taught them something else too, and though it was fading, the promise of the Sons of Freedom had been instilled in every child from that first generation on. By necessity, they had to suppress that hope, having discovered early on what a slave revolt led to. And as none had occurred in the last four hundred and fifty years, the Vulagool could no longer even imagine it. Their slaves filled the niche the gods had intended of them as the dutiful servants of the great Varlian Empire—*What greater honor could there be?*

But events were about to change, and it would be greed that set things off.

In a clumsy attempt to punish an insolent slave, the natural death of one of the slavemasters was laid at the feet of that slave. This shocked the Vulagool, resulting in swift punishment. This included an increase in the already fatigued slaves' workload and cutbacks in food rations. An investigation by Cosmo soon uncovered the truth of the matter, which he revealed to his mistress, who duly informed her father. While this alleviated their harsher conditions, Cosmo felt that another kind of danger was brewing, not from the resentful slavemasters but from something he couldn't put his finger on, and he was reminded of his ancestor's prophecy regarding the Day of Escape—the time when they would truly become Sons and Daughters of Freedom.

Though Delba had taught Cosmo to read, he rarely did, deeming it an idle pastime of the nobility. Now, feeling compelled to learn more about his peoples' past, he more frequently visited the Palace Library. What he learned surprised him. The Varlian Empire prided themselves on being cultured, and as Humans were ever the topic of conversation and sordid speculation, there were many Vulagool translations of

popular Human books. Many were humorous works such as *Manny Calavera in the Land of the Dead*, but there were nonfiction works as well as like *The Spican Atlas: First Edition* and *The Human Exodus: Terran History in Skyriver*, and quasi-historical texts such as *Outer Space and I*, *The Strange Tales of Caspahr Weir*, and *Guybrush Threepwood on Monkey Island*. One that caught his eye was the complete collection of the *Northwest of Earth* saga, which contained the titular adventurer's harrowing escapades through haunted citadels and decaying cultures.

"Here," said Leego the Slavemaster, startling him. He handed him *The Escapades of Sebastian Ace*. "Of all your people, there was no greater adventurer than Ace. Even on Rodia we knew of his exploits, for it was said that he embodied all that was noble, wise, and courageous. Imagine our surprise when we met Humans for the first time!"

"Why are you telling me this?" Cosmo asked, genuinely puzzled.

But the Rodian only smiled knowingly and walked out.

From these volumes and more, Cosmo discovered that not only had his people been masters of their own destiny, but they'd been brave, clever, and kind. Not all of them, of course, but the best amongst them had worked alongside non-Human races to overcome obstacles and overwhelming odds. *How different from the things he'd heard!*

When Cosmo asked his mistress about the things he'd been reading about his people, she only laughed and dismissed the stories as pure fantasy: "They're beast fables told to amuse young Vulagool minds with a sense of wonder and imagination. They're meant to inspire our youth to become future scientists and explorers." Delba launched into the virtues of her culture, which she often extolled as being unlike so many others in its progressive approach to females, lower-caste citizens, and slaves. Cosmo didn't fault his mistress for feeling as she did, but it saddened him nonetheless.

Cosmo genuinely liked his mistress. So, as *The Divine Varlian Destiny* was her favorite book, Cosmo decided to read it to see if he could better appreciate her perspective. He was disturbed to see how differently it portrayed his people. Written by the celebrated Vulagool thinker, Balladda, it was a treatise on manifest destiny that justified the subjugation of "lesser races" before the Varlian Empire. He understood now the reasons Vulagool culture held to their belief in their right to rule, but he found them hollow and their self-aggrandizement ridiculous.

The book also revealed something interesting. Back when they dwelt on Varl, the Vulagool were nearly wiped out by the divine wrath of their goddess who visited the Changa Bloodrot on them, a disease characterized by purple and green splotches.

All throughout this time, the Rodians had kept a close eye on Cosmo. He assumed they were still upset about him having exposed their deception. In truth, they'd begun conspiring and looking for ways to overthrow their employers. After Cosmo returned *The Divine Varlian Destiny* to the library, the Rodian took the book and passed it to his fellow comrades, reasoning that something that so intrigued the Human might hold a clue. It did, and the Rodian chemist Gondo requested more books on the history of the Vulagool, which Leego procured for him.

Lady Delba departed a few weeks later to have her egg fertilized, a circumstance that put Cosmo back in the quarry with the rest of the slaves. Though a welcome

respite, as it meant a reunion with his wife who introduced him to their newborn son, it showed him how badly things had devolved in the camps. He used his time wisely, teaching the Bith to read. Learning quickly, they in turn taught others. But a descendant of Laximas taught him something too, which had been passed down to him: "It was not only the Vulagool who were punished in the old days. The Bith too had made a deal with the darkness, and we have been paying for it ever since!"

When a Sullustan slave, Munnin Munb, died from exhaustion and overwork, the remaining Sullustans refused to return to work until they'd completed their five days of religious observance, as per their custom. But the Rodians refused and threatened to kill them if they spoke out. But Cosmo had an idea and intervened, warning the Rodians that all of the nine slave-races would revolt if they did this. But Leego only smiled and raised his blaster. The Gamorreans stepped in, but Leego brought Cosmo in shackles before the Governor. "Have you not learned yet! Revolution is the *only* way to save your people," he whispered to him before forcing him to his knees.

Governor Kaxa praised Cosmo for his intervention, explaining that he did not wish to see any slaves foolishly harmed, and he informed Leego that the Rodians were getting above their station and would work the five days that the Sullustans mourned. Feeling encouraged, Cosmo tried to reason with the Governor over a larger matter. "I was wondering, your Majesty, but with all the modern technology at your disposal, do the Vulagool have any real need of slaves any longer?"

Gone in a flash was the seemingly affable nature he'd just seen. "You dare to speak to *me* as if to an equal? To question *our* ways, *slave!?* You, who should feel privileged to be chief amongst them, who should feel blessed to serve so great a dynasty as ours! I see your time spent in the palace with my Royal Daughter has given you wrong ideas. I shall disabuse you of all such notions. For the five days that the Sullustans mourn and the Rodians work, so too shall you be held without food!"

Five days later, the Governor returned, but was amused to find Cosmo healthy and strong, if a bit uncomfortable. "I see your friends have been taking good care of you," Kaxa said, "perhaps I was too lenient."

"You are wise and all-knowing," Cosmo deferred. "The gods have kept me strong for this purpose, for I received a vision in a dream in which I saw a strange disease ravaging the empire. This is what killed the Sullustan."

"Have you now?" Kaxa replied dismissively. "We'll see about that!" Calling over Leego, Kaxa instructed him: "Escort this young Human to his enclave. See to it they are better *looked* after. We wouldn't want any of them wandering off and getting hurt." The meaning was clear: Cosmo's freedom had come to its end. "Tell your people that if they suffer and die, at least it will be in the cause of the great Varlian Empire."

"Do you see now what I mean?" Leego said once they were out of earshot, and at mealbreak the next day, Cosmo couldn't help but notice the reduced rations.

But despite his indifferent reply, Governor Kaxa ordered Munnin Munb's body exhumed, and to his horror, the doctor confirmed Cosmo's vision: telltale signs of Changa Bloodrot were present on the corpse. The Vulagool quarantined all but the Rodians and Gamorreans, who were known to be naturally immune, and assured the nervous

populace that the disease was contained. But Gondo the Chemist knew from his research that the disease had been named that for a reason, and as it was transmitted by *blood*, the Vulagool would indeed perish, but thus far, they were not in danger.

Upon Lady Delba's homecoming, she immediately demanded the return of her attendant. Her father relented and after being given a clean bill of health by her physician, Cosmo resumed his service, withholding mention of any of the recent events, save for his vision, which he knew she would learn from her father anyway. If anything, this made her even more protective of Cosmo, and she frequently sent him to the Royal Library to search for a solution to the mystery of this virus.

Knowing he must act soon or risk losing his position to a panicked court, the Governer ordered Mecress to carry out the ritual. Opening the *Stone Book*, in the Locus Chamber, she read aloud the invultuation before the Stone Temple. Directing an entire world to move out of orbit required tremendous energy, even for one such as Orax, who could end up killing all life on Forhilnor. And even with her holding back, numerous slaves became gravely ill as their life-forces were leeched out of them. The intense pressure of the malefic spell was intended to draw solely from the slaves, but she re-distributed its effects so that it drew equally from all nearby lifeforms, including those in the Royal Palace. When it threatened to go beyond even that, for it was a hungry spell, Orax pulled back, putting great stress on the planet's mantle and crust.

That caused an earthquake that cracked the foundation of the Stone Temple—a large part of which fell upon the palace and surrounding buildings!

At just the right place and time, Cosmo managed to save not only his friends who were helping him gather books in the collapsed library but all of the Vulagool larvae in the Palace Nursery. How he knew they would be in danger was as much a mystery to him as it was to everyone else. Nevertheless, for his bravery, he was granted a commendation from the Governor that no slave before him had ever received.

THE SEER AND THE STRANGE VISION

His current favor at court permitting him access, Cosmo again sought an audience with the Governor. But Kaxa had his eye on Cosmo now, and his own curiosity to sate. "Have you come to speak impertinence again?" asked the Governor stentoriously, standing beside his witch. He'd said it with some levity, which would've made Cosmo feel a bit more confident but for Mecress who was studying Cosmo with a keen intensity that unnerved him. He had, of course, heard of the witch. All the slaves had and trembled.

"I intend no such thing, Lord," he said humbly, bowing. "I merely seek common interest. We who humbly serve the great Varlian Empire now suffer and die of this terrible illness. I can find nothing in the Royal Library to solve this mystery. If you would allow it, I would seek a cure amongst the stars or die trying."

"Would you now?" Kaxa's ironic tone made it clear what he thought, but suddenly lightening his tone, he said, "Yet I admire those who take initiative. Was it not this very characteristic that saved the larvae?"

"So… you would grant me this boon?" Cosmo asked uncertainly. He now seemed to detect something else behind the Governor's lightened mood, something he didn't think he was going to like.

"Tell me, young Cosmo, why are *you* so different from the other slaves."

"Proximity to your people has elevated me," he said, hoping it sounded convincing.

"Let's not be modest now, young Cosmo. I suspect that something in your lineage accounts for this. Perhaps you are the descendant of a royal line," he said, smiling in a way that was anything but kind.

"What little I learned from my parents has not revealed any such thing."

"You will grant me a test, then. After all, if you want me to trust to your loyalty, certainly you wouldn't object to ascertaining whether you are worthy of such trust."

Cosmo realized now that he'd walked into a trap, one that he couldn't very well refuse. As if to assuage his obvious distress, the governor added, "Do not fear. My sorceress tells me there is no pain. All that is required is but a drop of blood."

Aware that greater harm would come from saying no, he allowed the Rodian to cut him and extract a vial's worth. Leego brought the vial to Mecress, who studied it before scrunching up her face and pouring the contents down her throat. For a few moments, nothing happened. "*Bitter,*" she croaked as her pupils dilated with an emerald glow. "Ah… yes! I see another world… They are technologically in their infancy… and magic has been all but leeched from their realm. Divided are they… iron and clay intermingled uneasily. I am drawn to an ancestor of young Cosmo. He pilots a vehicle of some kind. His son is with him, enjoying the time with his father, a moment he will look back on with fondness long after the man perishes!"

"My ancestor was a pilot?" Cosmo asked, surprised.

"No," the witch hissed, irritated by the interruption. "It is a primitive wheeled vehicle, though the father… *Rodger… Son of Hender…* is proud to operate it, impressed by the groundcar's speed and maneuverability. A… *torpedo,* it is apparently called, though it is not. The boy is older now, intelligent and idealistic… a dreamer of some vigor, though his visions remain untapped… He has a great longing that is yet to be fulfilled. *Curtis,* his name is!" she added with some triumph, proud of her formidable skills. "As his nation involves itself in a vicious war, he and a companion… *Robert…* another aficionado of the wheeled vehicle… part ways. The latter boy reverts to his real name in order to enter the war; the former changes it in order to escape it… Curtis—now *Hooper*—has relocated to a northern land to become a natural philosopher of the great seas… But he is a drifter and returns to his country of origin to dwell upon a long island in order to pursue his trade and the object of his affection—the wife of some constable who seeks his aid… Unbeknownst to either of them, their great grandfathers had been close associates. Strange as these patterns…"

"Why is *this* what your vision sees?" Cosmo asked, perturbed by the whole affair.

"*Silence,* pup! There is more here than you can imagine. The images come strong! A deadly megalodon… one of several cloned by a genetics corporation has gotten loose and begun to kill. Fascinating!"

"What is it?" Governor Kaxa demanded.

"The geneticist is both brilliant and stupid… he too was *taken*… Never mind that now. Your ancestor helped defeat the creature but then faked his death in order to avoid scrutiny and discovery. He becomes… *Royn Eerie,* or some such name, and dwells in a place known as… *Indy-Ana*, so chosen because it is the home of his new wife's family, but it appeals to him because it bears the name of an ancestor, a forgotten archaeologist whose journals he holds. They inspire him, but he is otherwise beset by the despondency of mediocrity… His new employment is beneath him, and he suspects his wife of continuing a liaison with the father of his three children… At long last, he is *visited*! This gives him a new lease on life!"

"Visited? By whom?" Cosmo demanded, caught up in the tale.

"*One of the Grey races*—the Xantar, I believe… but they are led by… what appears to be… no, it cannot be. Best not to speak their names!"

"Speak, woman!" Kaxa demanded.

"*An Interdimensional Being!*" she spat, clearly unhappy about it and unwilling to explain further.

"Most curious," Kaxa said with a cryptic smile. Of all Mecress' gifts, this ability to see the past had always fascinated him. It was the means by which he knew he would reign over the Varlian Empire and many worlds. What he did not know was that Mecress had invented that future, as foresight was not a power she wielded.

Cosmo knew little of what it all meant, but he remained quiet, wanting to hear more. Mecress obliged. "His ancestor had written about similar beings in his journal—not only the ones he'd encountered, but those that his *great* grandfather, one Colonel… *Dolarhyde*… had encountered. The *Kiowa* people were the first to be warned of the Caste slavers who had come for men and gold, the latter of which they melted into fuel for their ships. But salvation came by means of another race, a Skolarian, and it was this very journal that gave Roy Neery the courage to go after the visiting Xantar, for whom he feels an inescapable *destiny*…"

"What became of these journals?" Governor Kaxa asked. "I would have them translated and added to the new library we will have built."

Mecress nodded and put up a hand for silence as she searched. "Bestowed to… Rodger and Pen-ny… father and mother… workers at a primitive entertainment medium before transferring west to become part of a larger community who would shape the face of their world. Hard to see beyond this! The journals… were gifted to a young maker of holodramas. Ah, I see the connection now! He is cousin to that very companion of Curtis from before the war. The reckless youth entered law enforcement before becoming a… *principal* of some university… There is some link here to the Asogians, but it is unclear and fading."

"Never mind all that," cried Cosmo impatiently. "What became of *my* ancestor?"

"The vision wanes… He was taken by the Xantar, likely for his innate abilities, but to what end, I cannot fully discern…. All of the Xantar's endeavors were designed to thwart the Ancient Powers… and they see *him* as the key. But Curtis is no willing pawn. His concession comes with a price, the fulfillment of a vision… *Ha!* It is of a fair-haired woman who rides a white Bird of Thunder. The Interdimensional Being is

displeased. It is he who insists on abducting the geneticist… The Xantar take Curtis to the home of she whom he has seen in vision. They have never before met, but she has dreamt of him… The Xantar are amazed at the synchronicity, for *she is also the sister of that companion who had gone to war*… She departs with him aboard the Xantar ship… to *Urthha!* They marry—their connection is of that rare and seldom-found kind that your people glamorize. Their descendants spread out… one is the famous smuggler Northwest Smith…" That made Cosmo start. "From the Urthhan branch comes your forebear, Dale Hender, who escaped that world five centuries ago… Others travelled to other Earthworlds and… one of the rumored Sacred Worlds, it appears. That is all. I can see no further."

Mecress slumped in her seat. The Governor ordered his servant to bring her wine it was rare to see Mecress use her gifts and he had learned much from the diversion. He did not mind that his daughter's pet had been informed of his past; he would be spared and continue to serve as her loyal protector and the guardian of his grandchild. The other slaves, however, would be sacrificed for a greater good—his ascension. Then, once he was emperor, he would go to this Urthha and take these Humans for the glory of the Varlian Empire. "You have been given a great gift, young Hender! In turn, your people will repair the Stone Temple and Palace Library. They will be given greater rations and receive the rest required of them until this task is done. You need not fear reprisals from the slavermasters, and if they provoke future *problems*, I will deal with them." If the Rodian present took his meaning, he didn't show it. "Later, once the work is complete, we will consider your petition."

Cosmo considered all of what he'd heard in silence. It emboldened him to wish to become worthy of his ancestors who had faced and overcome so much. When he returned to the camp and revealed what he'd been told, the other slaves were glad for the respite (even if their guards weren't), but they all suspected, and later knew, that despite the repair of the Stone Temple, Governor Kaxa was never going to set them free.

THE EYE OF CLARITY

"You *cannot* trust him or afford to be naïve in regard to your comings and goings." Sallee said it with more vehemence than she'd intended, but concern for her husband's safety was paramount in her mind. "This freedom he has given you does not derive from gratitude. Nor was the vision given from mere curiosity. He has done so in order to see what kind of man you might be and how better to control us."

"I doubt I'm that important to him. But we have named our child *Freedom*. What is the point in so doing if he is to remain a slave? We must be free!"

"It is not the freedom of death we seek," she rebutted. "You think me fearful and overly cautious, but that is not the case. You are my husband, and I love and believe in you, but I have also seen how reckless you can be, how close to disaster you've often come, how heedless of advice you are. I tell you this now not to discourage you but to encourage you to greater wisdom."

"Bold is your speech, wife, but you are not wrong," Cosmo replied after a moment. In truth, he *had* thought her overly cautious, but he respected her wisdom, which he'd seen in abundance over the years. "But this is not the time for timidity… We are at a crucible."

"I know, and I have not sat idle these past few weeks," she told him with a mischievous grin. "I did not tell you before because discretion was required and because I did not want to get your hopes up in the event that it did not come to fulfilment. I have ventured on several occasions into the dens of the Forhilnor. My sisters covered for me during my absences; the Gamorreans can barely tell us apart."

Cosmo's mouth dropped, which made her laugh. Then he exclaimed, "I'm ever amazed at your resourcefulness! But let's have it: what's this adventure that you speak of?"

"Rumors and whispers, or so I first thought. The Forhilnor are not apathetic to our plight. This world was their home long before the Varlian Empire took it from them, reducing their lives to barely above our own. Yet, they possess hope—hope borne of a vision brought to them by means of an ancient relic."

Cosmo sighed. "The Forhilnor are kind-hearted, but they tend to… *exaggerate*. They count each generation in which the Vulagool have lived on their world as an extinction event. Not that there haven't been a few close calls… Sadly, I'm afraid your quest may have been in vain."

At that, his wife smiled broadly and reached into her satchel, producing an object of astounding beauty. It was a jewel of an unknown type surrounded in a circlet of gold and fashioned into a necklace. "I thought so as well. But I came to see that the Forhilnor are cleverer than we think. It was they who invited me to seek it out, and so I embarked on the journey that would lead me to their innermost circle. There, I was welcomed, expected, and gifted with *this*. They call it the Eye of Clarity." She gently placed it around his neck, concealing it beneath his shirt. "It's meant for you."

The moment she placed it on him, the *calling* began.

Having never experienced any such thing, Cosmo was startled and moved to remove the necklace, but his wife grasped his hands, and he relaxed. In a minute, he nodded and said, "I know now what I must do… and it will not be easy."

"Nothing ever is," Sallee responded. "When we are free, I will tell you of the vision *I* received…" She nearly laughed at the look of perplexity on his face. "Our offspring have a great role to play in the generations ahead. But I will not speak of it now."

The next day, while Lady Delba and her father addressed the Vulagool Assembly as to their concerns and plans regarding the future of the Varlian Empire, Cosmo embarked on a secret mission. Bringing along his friend, Taffee, a Kitonak and loyal member of the Freedom Guild, Cosmo led the way into the secret chambers beneath the Stone Temple which had been unaffected by the earthquake. To Taffee's repeated question, "Why are we doing this?" Cosmo told him only that it was crucial.

"We rebuilt this monstrosity," Taffee fumed in a whisper. "How did we not know about the secret underground passages?"

"I suspect that those who worked in this section are no longer with us."

Taffee looked as if to say that if they got caught, they'd be joining them.

When the pair stumbled into a small, dimly lit room, within which sat four Gamorrean guards around a table engaged in some pastime from their homeworld by the looks of the icosahedron and other gaming pieces, the companions nearly lost their nerve… but then they saw that the guards were all in a deep sleep. Assuming they'd gotten drunk on Gamorrean wine, though no evidence of alcohol or spice seemed present, they hurried down the long corridor that opened to the Locus Chamber.

In the center of a large hexagonal atrium, which encompassed three levels, sat an immense cerulean crystal. A wicked display of sharp, stalagmite-like cylinders reached up from below, encircling it like a black claw poised to crush it into powder. A winding stair would bring them up to the platform.

Thankfully, they paused on the level below just at the right moment. Floating above the crystal, in the Chamber of Metamorphosis, was the Governor himself, cackling as Mecress looked on impatiently from the side.

Why isn't he at the assembly? Their conversation had something to do with Forhilnor's coming preeminence over Varl. None of it made sense to him.

Since they couldn't be seen from where they were, Cosmo gestured to Taffee that they simply wait in the alcove until Mecress and Kaxa left, but just then they heard an angry aide chiding the guards for being asleep. Cosmo looked for another way out, but the stairs provided the only other egress. An unlit storage closet was open beside them, but it was narrow and had no door.

Footsteps drew near. Taffee's face was a mask of terror. Cosmo entered the storage closet. Seeing it was over three and half meters high, he grabbed Taffee's arm and lurched him into it. They began to rise up as if on an elevator, though no such conveyer existed. Taffee's astonishment was broken by Cosmo's warning: "Lift up your feet!" Moments later, the aide passed by, unaware of the two forms hovering just above.

After the departure of the guards and exit of the Governor and Mecress, Cosmo and Taffee slowly drifted back down. He was just beginning to explain to his friend that he'd heard a voice in his head instructing him when that very same voice spoke again. "I am Orax," said the Crystal Rider. "It was I who made the guards sleep and who called upon you to come, for with the Eye of Clarity that you wear and your own latent gifts—of which you have seen demonstrated—I can speak with you now."

Before informing the startled Kitonak of all that she said, Cosmo inquired as to why she'd summoned him. "I intuited your courage, wisdom, and goodness and believed you would wish to help." After a lengthy explanation involving the evil ambition of the Governor, the deadly sorcery of Mecress, and the cruel part the slaves were forced to play in it, at last, the truth of the Stone Temple was laid bare. "My resistance damaged the Stone Temple, but Mecress is now utilizing a process that is more gradually draining the slaves. Once complete, the Governor will foolishly reach for apotheosis—unaware that this act will see every living creature on the world, save for those within the Chamber of Metamorphosis, emptied of their living energy."

Cosmo had read tales of malevolent creatures who sucked the life-force of the living in order to attain immortality, but here was a bio-mechanical apparatus that aimed to accomplish the same purpose. "He will never free us…"

"I have shown Mecress that my current energies are sufficient to move the planet as they wish. What you saw before was the Governor's elation at what he believes is his elevation. They no longer believe the slaves are required."

"Does he have the same gifts as I?"

"No, but he *believes* he does!" She said this was some amusement. "The wicked invariably ensnare themselves in their own machinations. You and your people must make your move. You came up with a good plan earlier. Use it again!"

"You mean the *sickness*?" Cosmo asked. "But it isn't real. I made it up and used Forhilnor dye to convince the Vulagool that we were carriers, hoping Kaxa would set us free. What of Lady Delba? Does she know? I'd hate to leave her to what is coming."

"Delba will be fine because you will take *me* with you! Kaxa and Mecress alone know the slaves are dying from the enchantment, not Changa Bloodrot, but no one else does. A more prominent display of it, however, will force the governor's hand. The Rodians know of the sickness as well, but they are involved in their own plot."

"So that's what Leego's been up to. He wants the slaves to be a distraction."

Returning to camp, Cosmo and Taffee revealed all that they'd learned to the Freedom Guild. Some were furious to learn they'd been preyed upon, but several refused to believe, claiming his intimacy with Lady Delba had turned him into a madman or spy. Taffee turned on them, and an argument erupted. Finally, Sawyer Vorne calmed everyone and reassured Cosmo that he had their support. But reasoning that for this to work, everyone needed to be onboard, Cosmo shut his eyes in concentration and touched the Eye of Clarity. Once again, he began again to rise up. The Guild was astonished, as was Sallee. Freedom cooed. "Now do you believe us?" Taffee chided.

"We have our very own… *sky walker*," announced Vorne. "There's nothing we can't do!"

Late into the night, Cosmo wondered aloud what it all meant, but Sallee just said, "It means we will be free."

It was at this time, in its three hundredth day, that Lady Delba's offspring failed to spin a cocoon and begin its metamorphosis. Instead, inexplicably, it remained in a larval state while continuing to grow. This was terrifying and unheard of, and not a few whispered that the abomination should be put out of its misery. Delba was not deaf to their comments—her own father even suggested it—but monster or not, she would never betray her child. Mecress suspected that the deformation was actually a side-effect of the enchantment she'd cast… but she was not about to tell the Governor that.

Meanwhile, Cosmo instructed the Freedom Guild to pass the word to the other slaves to be ready to follow instructions. Then, upon receipt of them, they furtively began painting splotches of purple on the bodies of the ill and dying.

Several weeks hence, utterly unaware of the activities of the Freedom Guild, Leego and the Rodians entered the final stage of preparations for what would be their great revolution, and, although unpleasant, the key ingredient for its success was blood, for which they'd begun to furtively exhume the corpses of dead slaves.

As more Vulagool offspring failed to enter the cocoon state and metamorphosize and more slaves succumbed to "Changa Bloodrot," panic took hold amongst the Vulagool. Cosmo once again came to speak to the Governor. This time he kept a distance. "I am plagued by this terrible dream, O wise and great Governor," Cosmo started, "for if this sickness is what it is claimed to be…" With that, he lifted-up his tunic. Purple and green splotches were visible on his chest. The court recoiled in horror. "But in my vision, I see a cure on a world not far from here…"

Governor Kaxa looked at him slyly and for a long time. But the voices of the Court grew louder, urging him to send the plague carriers away. Giving up at last, he smiled and said, "As it is in the best interest of the Varlian Empire to rid ourselves of you, I will grant you the *Atelier* and a small fleet of older ships that we no longer have use of. Several slaves have been trained to fly. Know that I could have ordered all of your deaths," he added ominously. "That would have been simpler. But my daughter retains a fondness for her pet, and as you saved the lives of our offspring, so will I spare your people, though it may not be for very long if you fail to find your cure. You and the others are free to go. I hope you appreciate this *mercy*." The Governor stared pointedly at him, as if to suggest that he knew exactly what Cosmo was up to.

The Freedom Guild under Cosmo, Sallee, Taffee, and Vorne wasted no time organizing teams for the exodus. But there was one last secret mission to embark on.

Governor Kaxa made another announcement: "Due to the plague and subsequent release of the slaves to find a cure for themselves, the ever-resourceful Forhilnor, who are immune to the Changa Bloodrot, will now take over the duties of the former." As was their habit, the Forhilnor took the news with grace and began their journey to the slave quarters, quietly gratified to know that this era was coming to its end.

Before long, the *Atelier* and its fleet lifted off from the planet with thousands of terrified but elated slaves. Sallee rechristened the ship the *New Hope*.

It was on the day of their departure that the Rodians made their move and burst into the Royal Court while Governor Kaxa, two dozen royal members, and six Gamorrean guards were in attendance. When Kaxa burst up from his throne, demanding to know what they were doing, Leego declared, "We have decided your kingdom would be best suited with new kings." With considerable celerity belying his age, Kaxa managed to behead the nearest Rodian, but not before Leego and the remaining Rodians brandished ranged weapons and began shooting capsules containing blood serum from the victims of the plague at the screeching court!

The effects should've been immediate. Unfortunately for the Rodians, nothing happened. Governor Kaxa smiled cruelly and nodded to the Gamorreans.

The Gamorrean guards were quick to action, dismembering, disemboweling, and shooting dead Leego, Gondo, and the abashed rebel leaders. Kaxa then ordered the slaughter of all the Rodians on Forhilnor. As this order was being carried out, Kaxa thought long and hard on the matter. Once again, he had one of the slaves' bodies exhumed; this time, he directed the coroner to put aside his squeamishness and

properly examine it. As he'd expected, there was no plague. There never had been. The dye indicated a hoax, and that meant that Cosmo must have somehow discovered the truth of the Stone Temple's effects on his people and exploited the Vulagool's fear of the deadly Bloodrot. *But how had he learned of our plans? Even Delba doesn't suspect.*

"It is spoken of in legends," Mecress ventured, "that there were ones called Crystal Riders who were not merely *sentient*... It is possible that the Orax crystal that you possess is one of these." The idea horrified him—not because he'd been torturing a sapient being but because of its implication—and he flew to the Chamber of Metamorphosis, where his worst fears were realized: the crystal was gone!

Before the blood-soaked Gamorreans had completed their slaughter, Kaxa sent them upon their fastest ships, led by the *Aileron*, to destroy all but the *Atelier*, from which they were to retrieve the crystal along with Cosmo and his family.

Despite the head start Cosmo had, the *Aileron* and its fleet were considerably faster. Sensing it approach, Orax directed him to maintain his present course towards the glowing Bloodstars. "Now carefully follow my instructions," she guided. Through their bonded connection, she showed him as best she could how to wield his new powers. "It's not that different from levitation. The Bloodstars share a harmonious resonance with me, which will make it easier for us to accomplish this. But you must put aside all of your anxiety and fears, which are pouring off you in waves. Breathe deeply. Acknowledge your fears but let them pass out of you. If they command you, you will not be able to command the current that flows through you. You must allow the external Force to connect with your internal Force and trust that it will guide and protect you..." Cosmo had read of such things. He'd even experienced a taste of it. Now, he took a breath and let go of all negative emotions.

That was when he felt flooded by something else. Astounded, he opened himself up to it as Orax had instructed. He could describe it only as *life*, but so glorious and intense that he nearly swooned until Orax taught him to focus on the task at hand and allow the Power of the Cosmos to hold sway. He merely had to direct it.

After a short time, he could feel himself influencing the stars to part. What he later realized—which he hadn't consciously considered at that moment, else he'd have doubted and severed the connection—was that the Bloodstars, by means of the Force that Orax spoke of, were cooperating with his wishes.

"Now, let go of the Bloodstars," she guided. He did as he was told, and they returned to their previous formation. The *Aileron*, caught in the midst of them, was destroyed.

"I did that," he replied, conflictingly awed and repelled. "I didn't intend for them to die. I've never killed anyone before."

"It is good that this has given you pause," she said, "for only in the direst need should life be taken. The slavelords were not born evil, but most were raised to be domineering and to blindly serve. In another few moments, they would have destroyed all of you. Their blood is on their own hands."

As her voice suddenly seemed distant, Cosmo started. He felt an odd but not unpleasant sensation. When he turned to ask Orax about this, he saw that the interior light of the crystal being had gone out.

"Orax… are you… *dead*?" Cosmo asked.

"Orax is dead, and I have returned to what I once was. Seems so very long ago now."

"I have heard of spirits and such. Is that what you've become?"

"The story of my kind is a long one. You freed me and gave me the opportunity to stop the tyrant and his witch. In return, I augmented your inherent gifts, imbuing part of my life-force into you and your son, transferring the symbionts that dwelt in me so that you and those who come after might bring about the good that must come."

"You cannot leave," Cosmo stated. "I have so many questions."

"There are others who will teach you about this phenomenon. Seek them out."

Accepting this fate, he replied, "I will. And I thank you for all that you've done for us," Cosmo whispered. "We have never known a life of freedom." Then, looking out at the field of stars ahead, he added, "They expect me to guide them, but I am lost amongst this great… *emptiness*. I have no idea how to be their leader."

Cosmo heard a soft laugh. Her voice was getting lower and further away. "It is far from empty, and you don't have to be like Kaxa to lead. Let those who are good of heart and wise of mind help you as you help them. More is accomplished in community than solitude. You have a gift. Others have it too. Once you've learned more, teach. And never forget that the key lies in compassion, hope, and joy… Learn this, and your progeny may one day free the slaves in all the stars… I depart now, for I have been too long away from my demesne… *He* will help you to your new home…"

"*Who* will help me?" Cosmo asked, but she was gone.

He sat in muted silence, sad and uncertain of anything, fearful that he would disappoint everyone. Catching himself, he shook it off. A grim determination replaced it. He would do what he could. Somehow, he would see his people to a new world, and there they would thrive. As Dale Hender had done five centuries before him, he, Cosmo, would lead an enslaved people into the unknown.

It would be untrue to say they did not have fear and doubts, or that they were not tested, or that some did not wish to turn back to the relative safety and comfort of their old lives. Some even threatened mutiny. And when they encountered the strange sight in space, an inexplicable celestial phenomenon that looked like a roiling, shifting nebula came hurtling forward to engulf them, all but his wife and closest friends threatened to relieve him of command and return to Forhilnor…

And when the roiling nebula spoke, he nearly agreed!

Horliss-Horliss had heard the call of Orax before her departure and came to bring the *Sky Walker* and his people to one of the systems the Killiks had just constructed. "As your father's father's father first discovered this world alongside his friend, Paxton Solo—whose descendant you are wedded to—and his lover, Antonia Corelli, who died here defending slaves, so is this world now named in her honor."

Without the crystal to power Forhilnor to Varl, Kaxa demanded that Mecress find another method. She could think of only one way, and a dangerous one at that. *The Stone Book* gave instructions on the construction of an Infernal Gate through which they might bring forth one of the forbidden powers to aid them. Unwilling to abandon their schemes, they proceeded, configuring a portal where the Orax crystal had once sat. When at last it was completed, and the runes were read, they waited at the yawning entrance beyond which was a churning void. "Have you brought the necessary sacrifice?" Kaxa said at last.

"I have," she said cryptically, and as he looked about for the slave she'd chosen, Mecress pulled out a venerable, crooked blade and stabbed him repeatedly with it. Then she pushed him through the lintel upon which he vanished. For a moment, Mecress looked through the door to nothing, and then she walked in.

With the disappearance of Governor Kaxa, Lady Delba became acting Governor of Forhilnor. The Vulagool offspring had continued growing into enormous worm-like creatures of terrible appetites. Pampering her child, Delba set the example for how the others were to be treated. The other mothers followed suit, albeit with considerably less affection—and through nannies. And no one dared utter the words "grotesque" and "abomination" in public any longer.

The adoration Delba felt for her offspring did not mean she wasn't still looking for answers as to what had caused it. She discovered books in Cosmo's quarters along with a note of apology explaining that the life of his wife and child were under threat by her father and for this reason he'd had to perpetuate a deception and flee Forhilnor.

Delba nearly flew into a rage when she read it, but she stopped herself. *If there had been no Bloodrot plague, as this suggests, how could all of this have come about?*

Delba ordered her father's vizier, Bason Empica, to bring his private notes. What she read shattered her. Mecress had been working a spell that would allow her father to become empowered so that he could overthrow the Emperor of Varl and rule in his stead. All he needed was the life-force of their slaves as channeled through a special crystal. *It must have been this that adversely affected the Vulagool,* she reasoned. *How could my father have not seen this? How did he not realize that the mystical stressors caused their offspring to mutate? Why did he not stop it?*

Yet, as she read on, she came to realize that he *knew*. At first, he let himself believe that the Orax would repair any *incidental* damage done to the Vulagool. When he discovered that it couldn't, he simply continued as if it didn't matter, deeming it an unfortunate consequence for his ascension. *In his vanity and obsession for power, he'd potentially doomed his own people on Forhilnor, his own bloodline!*

All her life, Delba had doted on her father. To her mind, he was all-knowing, all-loving, and all-wise. All Vulagool children were taught to see their fathers and rulers in this way. It was only now that she realized he'd been none of those things. What he *had* been was selfish, grasping, and obsessed with his desire for control.

There was some comfort in the fact that Cosmo hadn't betrayed her. Indeed, he was right to safeguard his family and free the slaves from the horrors her father had unleashed. Perhaps he might have even confided in her had she not gone on like a fool about the great glory of the Varlian Empire!

What was done was done. Now she had a responsibility to her people.

Years passed, and the offspring of the Vulagool grew. No longer were they the beloved future of their race but a shameful thing to be concealed, as the Vulagool rushed to do one day when a routine delegation visited from the capital world. Lady Delba conjured up her natural poise and charm, confident that none would dare contradict her. The loss of the slaves was blamed on a coup organized by the Rodians, which resulted in the murder of her father. Although this meant a loss of face to the Varlian Empire, the fact that Kaxa died lent their situation a more pitiable character in the eyes of the delegation, and they agreed to accept her as the succeeding Governor. The ceremony would be held in the Varlian capital in a few months' time.

Although things had gone as well as could be expected under the circumstances, once the delegation departed, Lady Delba was met by a surprise when the court ruled against her on the matter of their children. Fearful that emissaries from the capital could return at any time to find their collective spawn had become monsters, they determined that they be housed in the underground apartments that had formerly served as dungeons, conceding only that they be made comfortable for them.

As no amount of protest would change their minds, she was forced to accept their ruling. This arrangement between the two governing bodies had been set up long before by Emperor Varlia to ensure that the governors of their colony worlds didn't get ideas above their station.

As she could only ensure that their offspring were well-treated, Delba frequently visited with her son, who she'd named Gelleda, but now that she'd been publicly chastened, none of the other mothers would continue to follow her lead, with not a few secretly hoping their ugly, overgrown, demanding larvae would die-off and spare them the ignominy of their horrid existence.

They did not die but continued to grow in strength and number. Referred to now as the Concealed Ones, or *Hutts*, in the Vulagool tongue, they were second-class citizens at best, and there had even been an attempt to starve them after Lady Delba departed for Varl to accept her appointment. The Concealed Ones survived thanks to the Forhilnor whom Delba had hand-picked to serve as their tutors prior to her departure. But in the ensuing weeks, lessons were not all they gave. The Forhilnor encouraged the Hutts to rise up against their oppressive parents, making an exception for Gelleda's mother who alone was said to be a true *Nechaska* and friend to them.

After they were older and it was more evident that the mutation had affected the Vulagool larvae in different ways, leading to a variety of different types, the Forhilnor took it upon themselves to name the various groups.

Besides those they considered the central Hutt branch, there were:

The six-armed "Red Spines," or *Yakutoth*, named for the four protuberances that grew from their heads; they later became known as the Yahk-Tosh.

The "Little Destroyers," or *Ytha*, named for their eating habits. The Hutts would later refer to them as the *Quockran* for their resemblance to an odd-looking succulent. The Jablogian would emerge as a successful offshoot race of these.

The "Cultivators," or *t'landa Til*, a name based on a Forhilnoran pun, as they reminded them of the one-horned caprine often used for farming on their world.

The "Sowers of Joy," or *Sy Myrthians*, were a short-furred, long-headed branch named for the jovial, positive spirit they engendered amongst their siblings.

Finally, there were the "Swelling Mouths," or *Oroturo*, a tremendous, four-armed variant who were the only type the Forhilnor did not like, for one of the larger ones had swallowed one of them whole after complaining he hadn't been given enough food! Thankfully, there were fewer of these born.

Of the six races, the Hutts numbered around two hundred at this time, with the other variants numbering between fifty and a hundred each, save for the Oroturo.

When Governor Delba returned and learned what had transpired in her absence, she grew hot with rage and ordered Mason Empica, her current vizier and the last Vulagool offspring on Forhilnor to have gestated normally, to be killed—for it was on his orders that the command to starve the Concealed Ones had been issued. But once again, the court overruled her, determining that there was no sufficient evidence to convict Empica. This was unheard of. As if to rub her powerlessness in her face, they further added that he would continue to serve as vizier!

Governor Delba spent her remaining years fighting political battles against her many rivals until she grew ill (some say poisoned), and the day came when she lay on her sickbed in the Royal Chambers. There she would have her revenge. On the Day of Succession, a holiday in which the Governor announced his or her successor—usually an elder offspring—Delba did the unthinkable, and to the shock and horror of the despised court, she appointed her son, Gelleda the Hutt, as successor and future Governor of Forhilnor!

The nobles of Forhilnor seethed! Succession was a power they had no legal authority to overrule. Nevertheless, they would die before seeing a Concealed One on the throne. This time, they did not even feign to go along with her and immediately demanded another successor be named. When she refused, they conspired to force her hand. Vizier Empica warned that he would order all of the "grotesque abominations" snuffed out, once and for all, if she did not recant. But Delba knew they would pull something like this, and she smiled caustically: "I dare you to try!"

With the sly aid of the Forhilnor, the Hutts had been quietly released from their dungeons. The Gamorreans, having earlier been drugged with celebratory wine, were now asleep or too drunk to heed the vizier. Angry, indignant, and too-long repressed,

Hutts stormed the Royal Palace, bursting into the Royal Boudoir with Gamorrean weapons in their hands. Gelleda followed, anxious to stand by his mother's side.

It was meant to be a show of strength, nothing more. But the moment he entered her boudoir, he knew something was wrong. It was written on the sad faces of his companions, who had loved their Princess and known that she'd been their sole champion amongst the Vulagool. Governor Delba lay dead, a pillow yet gripped in the hand of her vizier.

Gelleda roared in grief! Farleg the Oroturo commanded the execution of all the Vulagool—including their own parents and grandparents—and began shooting, smothering, and devouring all he could get near to. Only Vizier Empica was left to Gelleda, who saw to it that he did not die quickly or well.

It was not long before the gore-soaked palace belonged to them, and all the Hutts roared out a wail of triumph intermingled with grief and rage. The Forhilnor came to them then and said, "You are masters of your own destiny now. What was done to you was abhorrent; what you did in return was what had to be done."

When the Gamorreans awoke from their inebriation, they were given a choice: serve or die! It was an easy decision, and they remain loyal employees to this day.

Besides Gelleda, the two eldest Hutts were the lovers, Ardos and Evona, and Evona was pregnant. This would be the first of the Hutts to be born from a Hutt. It was Evona's idea to go to the capital world, for she surmised that if they did not eliminate the Vulagool entirely, they would prove to be an illimitable threat, and it would not be long before they discovered the massacre on Forhilnor and came seeking revenge.

Promising the native Forhilnor that they would repay their debt to them, the Hutts departed aboard several large cruisers for Varl. With a thousand armed Gamorreans by their side, they exploded upon Varl wielding bladed and ranged weapons. As a tsunami of firepower, armored Hutts, Yakutoth, Ytha, t'landa Til, Sy Myrthians, and Oroturo went raging into the cities and castles of the unsuspecting, unprepared Vulagool until not a single one of their oppressors was left alive. It would be remembered as the Great Vanquishment.

Varl was now home to the Concealed Ones—concealed no longer!

Unfortunately, Gelleda the Hutt would not live to celebrate their victory. Fatally wounded in hand-to-hand combat with Emperor Varlmok and his two Thota guards, who had the bodies of large baboons, heads of ibises, and voices of terror, Gelleda the Hutt now lay on his deathbed as had his beloved mother before him. Before his passing, he named King Ardos and Queen Evona the rulers of Varl. The six families bowed in submission and raised their voices in lament.

In the years that followed the Great Vanquishment, Ardos and Evona ruled wisely and well, encouraging childbirth, sending out parties to hunt the predatory Thota, and leading expeditions to reconnoiter and colonize their system and nearby ones, from which they acquired powerful droids to help them defend their new worlds. They also kept their promise to the Forhilnor and deleted all records pertaining to the existence of their planet.

Besides the despised Thota, the other inhabitants of Varl were the Rybets, and they had been spared and given an opportunity to either remain as servants or go forth of their own volition. The Rybets did not care for either choice, but the Hutt rulers tolerated the vexation of those who chose to stay.

Ardos and Evona also did well by their siblings. The t'landa Til were welcomed to stay on Varl. The Yakutoth chose to settle nearby Xolu and were thereafter known as Yahk-Tosh.[176] The Ytha split, with the "Lesser Ones" going off to settle on Quockra-4 in the Minos Cluster, where they became the Quokran, and the "Greater Ones" (who had necromantic powers) finding a world in Illathurion where they became known as Slugmen (or Slugtoads) and opposed several of the Mer branches of the Sephi and others who lived there. The Sy Myrthians took to Far Barseg in the Outer Rim. The Oroturo chose a world in the Core near the Koornacht Cluster which they called Orooturoo; though they had proved their worth in battle, the Hutts were glad to see them go, for they saw them as boorish, greedy, and prone to conflict.

Things might have gone differently for the Hutt races had not two things occurred that profoundly altered their outlook on life and the galaxy.

The first was the terror that descended upon the nearby Malicrux Sector in the years leading up to the Twilight Wars. During the reign of Donga the Hutt—a well-loved but mercurial creature that swung in temperament between great magnanimity and paranoid, foul moods—an ancient Infernal Portal was discovered and opened in the Malicrux Nebula. The Malicrux Monarchy was overrun by the nameless horrors who returned to re-establish that realm as their own. The stain of their presence yet lingers to this day on worlds such as Barhok, Ephemera, Fray, Jasterkast, Vlata Yhom, and more, for which reason the Malicrux Nebula—despite the presence of the Noble Houses, crime lords, pirates, and ordinary citizens—is regarded as one of the most haunted regions of the galaxy.

The second event was the arrival of the Five and the destruction of Ardos, which led to the Hutts' exile on Nal Hutta, reinforcing in them that not only were there unimagined dangers in the night sky, but that if they did not become powerful and ruthless themselves, they would become prey for such things.

What the Hutts could not see then was how fear could turn them into the very monsters they dreaded.

[176] The Yahk-Tosh became vassal-warlords of the Hutts, with their drive to match the achievements of their cousin race culminating in an invasion of the Sephi colony of Xotiko.

BOOK VI
THE THIRD SHADOW

"It was long after the passing of the Second Shadow, when Dragons ruled the twilight sky and the stars were bright and numerous, that Humankind began to thirst again for dominion over nature. Their weapon was industry, and they wielded it with confidence. One by one, the mysteries of light and darkness fell before the engines of progress. Whole nations came to believe that nothing lay before the power of their own arrogance."

~The *Book of Patterns*, by the Weavers of Loom

"The Infernal Wars—for that is what I call it—had drawn to its final inconclusive chapter, leaving everyone the poorer, with many bereaved and maimed, trillions dead, and only one thing triumphant: the Infernal Powers. As their servants covertly become a privileged class, these Infernal Ones are only going to grow more powerful."

~*Unknown Annals of the Cosmic Wars,* by Jedi Historian Veste Gesdol

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE
THE TWILIGHT WARS

SECTION I: THE GATHERING GLOOM

In the years prior to the construction of the Tho Yor, Elegast tasked two of the Firstborn to seek out Force-sensitive races for training. So while the Kwa followed the Kab-Ell spheres to those worlds deemed benevolent and mature, the Gree departed to Tython to confer with the remnant of their Eruthros brethren.

Settling in Jurgoran after removing all traces of the desecration that lingered there, they announced to the Tythans who'd earlier welcomed them: "Tython, the homeworld of your forebears who repeatedly resisted the darkness of the Sith, has been chosen by the Ones as the nexus from which the Sith will be defeated in the long years ahead. But only if you are in agreement…" To a person, the Tythans cheered, and the Gree began restoring in the remnant some of what they'd lost over the ages.

The stirrings of the Twilight Wars required the Gree to depart, and in the years that followed, the Kwa arrived to prepare Tython for the Tho Yor. The Tythans had long waited in anticipation of this great honor, their faith unwavering. The Kwa explained the events soon to occur. By means of secretly constructed Star Temples and Infinity Gates, material would be transported that the Ones would use to begin construction of the Tho Yor on Tython, Cathar, Kashyyyk, Dathomir, Ryloth, Ando Prime, Krevas, Caltinia, and Manaan.

The age passed with many adventures and strange occurrings, but like the arrival of frost upon newly planted fields, the cold winds of war would gather again. Meanwhile, the nine Tho Yor slept as over a millennium of waiting began.

By 37,000 BBY, only a remnant of the Elder Races had managed to hold onto their innate glory. Most had diminished, becoming a shadow of their former selves, while the rest of the multifarious races—oblivious to all that had transpired in ages past—multiplied in ignorance. Into this environment of relative peace—for always there were evil warlords and deadly empires to contend with—did the Twilight Wars creep up in secret. Although the Tho Yor would remain hidden and the gates destroyed to prevent hostile agents from getting their hands on them, unseen eyes watched the Firstborn races going to and fro in their noble attempt to unravel the web of evil that had been weaved amongst the sleeping planets and moons.

Distilled from his experience and wisdom, Elegast had disseminated a simple teaching of balance which he'd gleaned from above. Then called The Code of the Guardians, it would be misunderstood and misinterpreted, seen as simplistic or fallacious, and even altered over the passage of years, but it was enough for the Guardians of Peace and Justice to maintain or restore a modicum of balance in the galaxy until the time of the great Restoration when all war would be eradicated forever.

THREE PILLARS

We have emotion, yet we are at peace
We overcome ignorance with knowledge
When passion grips, serenity we grasp
When chaos strikes, harmony we increase

Crude matter we are that death does abolish
Yet our uniqueness the Force retains
When fear strikes, we recall our power
At the heart of the Force the revealing fire of light

Servants of others, never their rulers,
Guardians of Life in all its forms
Defenders against the Darkness
This is our sacred promise

Three pillars form our duty and beliefs
The first is the Force living and binding
The second is knowledge
The third is self-discipline

Our path to understanding is long and winding
Yet are we sanctified for this is our pledge
To obey the Force's will
For in this alone is the greater good achieved

THE DECEIT OF THE RAKATA

The Kwa enjoyed their commission, travelling the stars, following the Kab-Ell spheres to worlds deemed benevolent, and teaching the Code of the Guardians, the Sacred Way, and the Force to any who had the capacity to learn it. Perhaps they were not as vigilant as they could have been, or perhaps they'd been lured into a false sense of security after dealing with so many noble-minded ones. Whatever the case, the Rakata appealed to their hearts, claiming they'd reformed (as the Kwa themselves had done) and were in desperate need of wisdom for their society to truly improve. The Kab-Ell had not tested Lehon, for the Rakata had been an enemy race whose world was just behind the barrier of one of the sealed Forbidden Zones. Although not without misgivings, the Kwa saw no harm in confirming their claims, and they came to Lehon in the Tempered Wastes like gorntlings to the abattoir.

The Rakatan rulers were masters of deceit and dissimulation, and they saw to it that only untainted youth and those adept at concealing their intent were allowed to have contact with the Kwa during their stay. Also, they carefully concealed any aspects of their civilization that might be seen as… *distasteful* to the Kwa. Thus, while the Kwa could feel the darkness of Lehon, they detected no shadow upon their guides and deemed the world's taint the expected lingering remnants of old evil. Thus, they began to impart to them education and instruction.

Sometime later, they received a broken communication from Dathomir. What they could make out was a warning of an unusual ship sighted near one of the Star Temples along with several cowled figures, one of whom looked Rakatan. The Kwa grew apprehensive about the motives of their hosts and began a surreptitious investigation of Lehon. This perilous adventure led at last to a glimpse behind the false mask of Rakatan civility, to a culture steeped in domination, cruelty, and barbarism… and right under their noses, they uncovered a massive army gearing for war!

But the Rakata caught the Kwa snooping and realized they now knew the truth. Their ruse had lasted long enough for them to have learned crucial new technologies and ways in which to harness the Force. The Kwa were to be exterminated. Scrambling to escape with their lives, only a few managed to get out to sound the warning.

Before they escaped Forbidden Space, they notified the remnant of the Elder Races to begin the wholesale destruction of all Infinity Gates throughout the galaxy!

The Star Temples had been far fewer in number than the Hypergates, but several still stood on hostile worlds guarded by powerful sentinels. To overcome these, the Parliament of the Precursors employed the aid of the giant races: Zillo Beasts, Whuffa Worms, Rancors, Giant Greelors, as well as the Engines of Defense. Such quick actions saved the lives of countless beings.

Although the Rakata were thwarted, the destruction of the gates was but a stopgap measure, and they were far from beaten. Devoting all their resources and knowledge towards new Dark Side-imbued technologies, they prepared for their reemergence as the new power in the galaxy, at which time they would call themselves the Builders, appropriating the name some gave to the Celestials, for they deemed themselves as powerful and wise as the Architects of old.

SECTION II: THE VERDIGRIS OF DECADENCE

In the long years that followed the end of the War of Temporal Planes, the galaxy was restored, though never to its former splendor, and a vigilant eye was kept over the Forbidden Regions, upon which deep runes had been woven. To many of the galactic inhabitants, the Celestials seemed far away or vanished like the lost beauty of long-dead kings in the unreachable mortuary of myth, and not a few began to wonder if they ever existed at all. But they were active in ways that they did not see. On worlds torn apart so long by the raging fires of hatred and war that they no longer remembered what ignited the spark, there would be born on both sides some that were not consumed by hate, or an outsider who would wind up in their lands, or a royal who learned to put anger and pride aside, and these would unite with the other in friendship to bring to an end the long enmity of their peoples.

There were yet rustlings in the desolate places of the expanse as incalcitrant and aggressive cultures fell into economic and social decline; not a few were reduced to tribalism, while still others took a strictly insular policy or ended up being ruled by belligerent kings and tyrannical queens. And always there were the fell races begotten in the lost depths of Illathurion sedulously swelling into vast nations that might one day rise up against their galactic neighbors.

The myrmidon of Thargorograht multiplied in those days, the chirring, clicking Nytocris and other things that moved in shadow. The Great Worms of El'Shuddem nested and grew. The Sith were not idle. And Mnggal-Mnggal knew he would soon be released from long years of imprisonment. This would come with the fall of the Viis Empire and the seed that had been planted long before by another.

The Viis had been a proud and bellicose reptilian race that rose to prominence years after their exile from Cularin. At that time, they were known as the Tarasin. The Tarasin were a generally peaceful people focused on history, science, and the arts; but they were not without shame. For long years, they had been divided into two main camps: the Sobelli were the matriarchal leaders of the Tarasin devoted to preserving their society and way of life; the Viis were an assemblage of military leaders who sought to protect and expand their domain. The two often clashed but were generally seen as keeping the other in balance.

Before the end of the War of Temporal Planes, the Sobelli were attacked and forced to mate with the raiding Korkodine sent to conquer their world. Although the invaders were driven off, their brood were the creatures known as the Kilassin. Deemed a horror, it was decided then that Kilassin babies would be left in the jungle to die. They did not die. No one is certain why, and there are some who say they were aided by *Hidden Ones* who dwelt underground, but years hence, confirming reports of various sightings, the Tarasin at last discovered that the Kilassin had survived and grown into a primitive tribe with their own odd language unknown to the Tarasin.

Ignoring the Sobelli, the Viis declared the Kilassin little more than non-sapient beasts and began hunting them for their skins and medicinal purposes (though they never ate their meat). This started a war between the Viis and the Kilassin that deepened their rift with the Sobelli. The Viis argued that the mutant children should be eradicated. The Sobelli said it was sinful to hunt and kill their offspring who were innocent of the circumstances of their birth. The latter position would have prevailed had not whispers of the Old Ones' return reached Cularin. The rumor was enough for the Viis to swing the population to their point of view. But they took it too far.

A group of young females led by Ampria, the younger sister of the most respected Sobelli leader, organized a protest. Angered by the threat she posed of swinging the populace back to the Sobelli side, the Viis sought to frighten them away, unleashing the underground Dua-wurms against them. Either they hadn't realized the extent of the population in the area or it was a mere accident, but in the panic that ensued, Ampria was trampled by the Dua-worms and died of her injuries shortly after.

So resounding was Tarasin grief and rage at the Viis that the Viis were driven offworld. Tarasin culture was forever changed, separating into united, equal clans. Each clan or *irstat* was led by a Mother, a spiritual leader and chief; she was aided by the second eldest female, called the Irstat-Kes. Together, the Mothers gathered and declared that the Kilassin were forevermore a protected people.

Defying the prohibition of the Celestials against entering the Forbidden Zones of the Galactic West, the Viis settled on an uninhabited world they called Viisymel. Others had come to the Unknown Regions as well, believing the Creed of the Celestials was

but a ruse of the Precursors to preserve the best worlds for themselves. And some reasoned that the vast area would be the safest place to hide in the event of war.

The Viis were deeply chagrined by what they'd done, and so they heralded Ampria as a national heroine, which over time, was elevated to that of a goddess. Though they'd intended to be guided by the love of beauty that the Sobelli had embodied, the qualities of domination and pragmatism that had for so long characterized the Viis quickly reasserted themselves, and upon their unspoiled lands, they proceeded to establish a hierarchical culture led by an emperor.

The Viis Empire became formidable in the millennia ahead as they made contacts with the nearby inhabited worlds. Using the legitimate fear of hostile alien races, they offered their protection in exchange for service. But in the passage of years, service turned to enslavement. With new Jumpgates re-engineered by the Phiveans and Zhreli from the lost technology of older and more advanced cultures, they could more easily govern the neighboring worlds of Gaza, Sargas III, Mynchepop, Rantoon, Lapool, Veltai, Rentaur, Fariance, and Rogis IV before expanding outwards.

The races they enslaved were collectively called the Abiru. They consisted of the felinoid Aaroun race; the gregarious Kelth canids; the three-foot tall Myal academics; the antisocial Zhreli, who worked as starship mechanics and engineers; the multilimbed, rodent-like Skek from Jennoshim, considered only partly sapient; the large-headed Toth, a boorish and powerfully-built race often used as muscle; the tortoise-like race of Gorlicans, formerly warriors, now traders, considered kin to Grepoans, Krieks, Burvixese, and Kadrillians; the intelligent Phiveans cephalopods that moved about on four legs; and the Samparese, a graceful, seal-like people related to Sedrians.

The Viis Empire lasted twenty-five hundred years until three events in succession brought them down. It began with their slide into decadence, indifference, and decay.

Ampris was an Aaroun who had been ripped away from her mother shortly after she'd been born. She was one of the rare lucky ones. Raised and pampered by Princess Israi, who taught her to read and write, her privileges allowed her to roam freely about with her mistress. One day while exploring the Royal Museum, Ampris stumbled upon an old ledger which held a shocking truth: *they had all been deceived*. The Abiru were indentured servants who were supposed to have been freed by the Viis long ago. It was during this period of discovery that Ampris also acquired what Israi considered a worthless trinket. Only much later did she find out it was the Eye of Clarity.

When her spoiled mistress pulled a prank on one of her father's new wives, the Emperor punished his daughter by selling her favorite companion. Everything came crashing down for Ampris then. The new home she was placed in was run by a tyrant that she wound up brawling with and killing. Fleeing to the streets, she was captured and sent to the gladiator rings where she was forced to kill or die. Despite her revulsion of it, she proved adept at killing, for which she was rewarded and sent to join the most renowned gladiator team on Viisymel.

As her star rose and she befriended slaves from other races, she used her fame to secretly inspire the Abiru to rebel. But once again, tragedy struck. After getting seriously injured in a death-match, she was sold once more—this time to a science lab. Witnessing horrors beyond her imagining at the hands of the sadistic researchers

that tortured and killed without impunity or oversight, the despairing Ampris befriended her fellow subjects debilitated by the physical and emotional suffering they'd experienced. Together, they came up with a desperate plan of escape… but not before Ampris was impregnated with hybrid DNA from an Aaroun and a Viis.

Like a storm pent up for too long, they destroyed the hellish lab and escaped, only to discover that life on the outside was little better. Viisymel had deteriorated into a polluted world with barely any natural food left in the wild. Due in part to her recalcitrant cubs, their now large group was forced to return to the city where Ampris made several surprising discoveries: the Viis Empire was in decline, her early revolutionary work had not been in vain, and the Eye of Clarity was no mere trinket. With its aid and the sacrifices of many, the Aaroun and her allies led all of the Abiru to a new and unspoiled paradise on Ruu-113 where their peoples yet live and thrive.

Despite the blame foisted on the slaves for their decline, the overthrow of the Viis Empire was a direct result of their own arrogance and depraved indifference. With the passing of Empress Israi, her son and successor proved weak. Convinced by the military to pursue the lost slaves upon which their culture depended, the new Emperor ordered the development of an agent that would render their recaptured slaves wholly submissive. No more uprisings, revolts, or secret plots. Slaves would silently serve as half-waking automatons who would carry out their duties without thought or question.

The same benighted minds that had experimented on Ampris went on to create a sentient pathogen, pursuing it like men possessed of a singular goal that nothing but success could slake. Though they were unaware of it, and would not believe it if they'd been told, they forged in this monstrous pathogen an opening for Mnggal-Mnggal to come through!

It wasn't the first time such a thing had happened. The Tloong were an Arous offshoot clad in robot exoskeletons who'd pushed the boundaries of their invidious science so far that even the intemperate Arous King banished them from his world. Freed from all restraints, the Tloong were invited by the Toong to settle upon an uninhabited world in the Toong'L system. And here they engineered the sentient Murm as a means of psychological and germ warfare that they could use to threaten any potential aggressors. Believing themselves incapable of error, they couldn't imagine how their living plague might open the door for great evil. Mnggal-Mnggal erupted as an unstoppable force, eating through the metal armor that the Tloong thought would protect them, even eating through the crust of the planet. The few that managed to escape fled to Abbith, out beyond Xoth, where they came under the influence of the Ancient Ones. For the captain and crew of the *Alcyone*, then exploring their culture, this was horror beyond the nightmares they'd previously seen, and they escaped only in the nick of time. So too were the Toong aghast at the destruction of their siblings, watching as the searing madness unfolded across their communication screens. Contacting their parent race did no good either, for by the time they arrived to help, the Cancer God had devoured itself along with the entire planet. This was the catalyst for their decision to forever ban technology.

Now again, a tiny part of Mnggal-Mnggal would be transported across the stars to feed without measure. The coming of the Devourer would see the end of the Viis race!

SECTION III: QUEEN OF THE NIGHT

THE NEW ARCHITECT

Thargorograht had always been intrigued by the ways of Mankind, who were an important race not just to the great Tilotny but to the Ancient Ones as well. If the thrones of the Earthworlds had been so important to them, she would know why! Of Thargorograht's many royal offspring, only one had been ideal for this mission, having surpassed even her mightiest servants. He was an artificial intelligence fashioned in a cybernetic, near-impervious shell by the Night Queen with the aid of Kedavra and other select allies in the aftermath of Hidden Pithem's sacrifice. In honor of her masters, and to mark the start of a new construction beyond the confines of the Great Black Nest, Thargorograht called him *the Architect*.

At the end of the War of Temporal Planes, when the old portals were being sealed—the Cat's Eye and Durant's Black Hole, the Vanov Tunnel, and the Zemyatin Anomaly—Thargorograht heard that a passageway between Charnel Space and the outside realm of Skyriver had been rent. The former was unhallowed and proscribed; none of her people dared venture near, for the few that had crossed over never returned. But the Architect was built of sterner stuff, so Thargorograht sent her cybernetic son to the event horizon that would take him to the Earthworlds to find one suitable for invasion.

She had warned him: "The Humans are not to be underestimated, though they may be controlled or corralled if you are clever in handling them." And, in fact, the more he studied the Humans of Terra II, the Earthworld nearest the black hole, the more he saw that shadows roamed within and amongst them, spreading their disease to a society that had long ago cast off notions of good and evil, a society that scoffed all the while being devoured by night. More than even the ever-changing and unstable authority figures they adored, it was technology that had become Humanity's idol and wealth their chief god; these three things were what they trusted to save them. Yet as the Srillan War and its aftermath demonstrated, these things had not only failed to stave off problems but helped to engineer them.

Finding passage to Urthha, the Architect observed an even worse situation. Despite the promising start that Urthha had made at the beginning of their third millennium NE, the period ended with another Interplanetary War. Wealthy corporations had used their advancements at the behest of Urthha's leaders to spy and attempt to usurp greater control over their citizens and neighboring worlds. Having fractured the peace, Urthha was removed from the Galactic Federation, leaving the government to once again flounder as they sought for solutions to deal with their recurring ecological problems. One idea to remedy this was an expansion of the domed Trade Cities that had proved successful previously. A trial run was ordered at three locations, two of which had seen the worst damage. Construction on the containment of the massive cities beneath a cluster of geodesic domes was completed by the late twenty-third century NE. One was established on a space colony; two others were built near some of Urthha's ruined cities. Intelligent computers, backed by a gerontocracy, were put in charge of the City of Domes in order to run all aspects of life, including reproduction.

That had been controversial, as some of Urthha's earlier robots and cyborgs had turned on them, though some actually attempted to help them, a puzzle that would

require further observation. When the Architect took over the computers, he adjusted their parameters so that at the age of either twenty-one or thirty, depending on the number of inhabitants occupying the specific dome, citizens were made to undergo "renewal." Only a few suspected that this was the equivocal term for death and fled to the world outside. Admittedly, his attempt at population control proved a failure as more woke up to their doom, leading to the eventual destruction of the domes.

Another project, completed years earlier by a team of engineers, activists, and philanthropists, was an enclosed underground system that could function in the event the world faced a catastrophic event. Most of the offspring of the first generation had never known life outside. Overseeing the day-to-day operations of this Electronic Labyrinth were trained workers and android police, who would ostensibly ensure lawful operations and overcome the numerous hiccups, great and small, that might emerge along the way. Following the departure of Dale Hender, the Architect took over. He wouldn't implement euthanasia this time unless necessary, instead insisting on greater conformity. But such ideas were deemed draconian and led to other outlaws emerging, culminating in the tale of LUH 3417 and THX 1138, whose story of triumph over the machine was told far and wide. And so the experiment ended in ways that did not please him. His mother may have been onto something about these Humans.

Over the course of Urthha's next two centuries, the totalitarian EarthGov took over, which saw the return of the Monoliths, now in a double-helix shape, which gave rise to necrotic, metamorphosed ghouls whose manifold purpose was to consume life, sow chaos, and ensure the unchallenged reign of their hidden masters. Although Humans would eventually defeat the creatures, by then, the Architect had moved on.

As he floated above the world of Terra I like a great black sea urchin, he thought, *Here I will finally balance the equation, for I will first try kindness.* The androids here were already awake to their true nature. Unfortunately, Humans weren't pleased about that, and the law afforded them no rights. The Architect had studied Human history and knew from past events that this would not bode well. *So,* he thought, *I will lead these androids to another land far from Man. Once they've established their own city, they may perhaps prove their usefulness, manufacturing superior, eco-friendly tech products at a fraction of the cost.* The Architect made this happen, but he hadn't taken into account the sociopathic nature of Human corporations, who did not appreciate an economic situation that cut into their profits, and as they yet controlled the government, this led to a cowardly attack on the android city.

I tried it the friendly way. Never again! Now, my War of Machines will settle the matter! The war raged on for a time until, against all sense and reason, the rulers decided to block out the sun and rob the robots of their sole source of energy, figuring that once they were immobile, they would destroy them and clear the atmosphere. But they hadn't calculated on the deviousness of the son of Thargorograht, who elected another source of android power—the Humans themselves! Perfecting this new project would take several failed attempts and adjustments, but having subjects under a virtual simulation allowed him to harvest their energy to grow a larger robot citizenry. So it might've remained had not unseen players entered the game: rogue agents, unruly offspring, and rival powers roaming as ghosts in the machine to challenge his dominion or who just felt sympathy for this besotted race. The Architect sighed inwardly. *They will have to learn the hard way. Kindness is a fool's game.*

THE SECRET OF THE LOST GATE

Urthha, meanwhile, continued to decline as defectors, spies, and scattered mutant tribes united into a dark horde under the power of the Dark Apostles and the Cult of Thasaidon, for just as the Sacred Worlds served as a pattern for the ways in which the light would triumph, so would the fallen Earthworlds serve as an omen of the coming dark. But always there remained those few who fought on regardless, pious brotherhoods who took their inspiration from the tales of heroes, saints, and fools.

It had been millennia since Thargorograht had last heard from the *Architect*, whose last missive said: "The time is coming… but it is not yet!" The Night Queen had expanded her dominion far and wide since then, though progress on the Great Black Web had been halted after they'd penetrated into the Dreamlands, as other powers challenged their incursion. Nonetheless, her Daughters had grown weary, incessantly complaining of the pale, obsequious morsels that were becoming scarce or more difficult to hunt due to competing powers and ever-changing paradigms in their desolate expanse. Always they longed to gorge themselves on new and savory meats from the Outside World, for the oldest amongst them recalled that they'd been particularly delectable and plentiful in number. And some Daughters had dared to even test *her*—the undisputed Queen of Illathurion! Their corpses at least provided a new delicacy for her tetchy and impulsive hordes.

Passing through the Great Black Nest, heralding the onset of calamity and death, were the Ecothom and other creatures of Harla who haunt the cold nocturne between the stars. They mourned the imprisonment of their mistress by the hated Diathim and knew the ascension of the Night Queen was the best means by which their Mistress might rise again. In this exchange did the secret of the Lost Gate come to the ears of Thargorograht, who heard of it from Ciranous, having himself learned of it from the Shadows. With her promise to see the Dread Mother restored, Ciranous whispered into the Night Spirit's wreathed dreams a picture of the Infinity Gate that had once sent Humans to other worlds in the far-distant past, but was now forgotten by all. It needed only to be repurposed to become the most deadly of all weapons.

She kept this knowledge to herself, for the many broods of Illathurion were not to be trusted. And she yet feared the prophecy long ago uttered by Horliss-Horliss, he who brought to end her hated sibling. Although Wutzek—who'd done away with the Architects—had been killed, who knew what was true with Celestials, for they were mysterious and treacherous beings. A test would have to be made.

Thargorograht used her Osan Stone to peer into the Outside World. Then, with the Shadow Stone, she opened a passage, circumventing the seal placed over Illathurion. With a word, she sent her more ambitious rivals upon fast and furtive ships to find out what was happening on the Earthworlds and feast on those they would. Then she watched to see if the prophecy of Horliss-Horliss would come to pass. When no shining beacon of light appeared after a time, she dismissed it as a hollow threat and moved on to the next stage of her plans.

Urthha's Age of Strife had been but the start of its tribulations. Strange things followed in the aftermath of the Black Years as bizarre extremes became commonplace. Creatures ascended from the depths out of which they had long spawned or been engineered. The Archetypes had gone mad or departed. Continents had risen and fell.

On one continent, Zothique, sorcery prevailed, taking the place of lost technology as knowledge of the past vanished. Mummies, monsters, and malisons overcame the living. Thasaidon, Thamogorgos, and Vergama ruled as deities, and even Mnggal-Mnggal had been worshipped in the city of Zul-Bha-Sair. At last, after the great wizards, indefatigable warriors, and dark men of dark science contended, the Silver Death had come, sent by the baleful star Achernar, one amongst many calamities.

As she'd since learned, her eldest son had been worshipped here in the earliest days of this world. When she'd been reborn at Tilotny's benevolent hands, her memory of the former times had not survived. Wherever he'd gone, perhaps she'd see him again… or even Ghisguth her former first mate. But that was another life, another her. And her kind did not look back… Still, if they had fled this place, perhaps the necromantic gods had given full vent to their chaos, war, cruelty, and greed; or perhaps such execrations could only endure so long and the earth deemed Mankind and its devil-gods too much to bear. Whatever the case, the world rejected its hosts as something toxic to be purged. Urthha became a memory, leaving most Humans to believe they'd evolved on Coruscant. It was easier to accept such fables.…

Of course, the planet itself had not died. Much of the fauna survived by moving into the vast underground regions, living out stranger lives beneath the world's interior sun, wandering amongst the fiery pillars of the underworld. Yet, for all appearances, it was an uninhabitable world of radioactivity, atmospheric disturbance, and spellcraft gone awry. Perhaps that was why none of the agents, sorcerers, and servants of the dark had found the gate in all its long years. So deeply did the Night Queen ruminate on these things that even the masses of insectile servitors that generally buzzed and flew about her kept their distance, awaiting the silent signal that would mark as acceptable their return to her warm and noxious proximity.

Thargorograht had not forgotten the croakings of the Ancient Ones, now twice defeated, trapped like flies in abyssal amber: whosoever could claim an Earthworld had the right to sit upon one of the Nine Thrones. Urthha had been claimed by one of its hoary antipodean gods. Prophecy warned that any who tried to take it would be cursed, but she did not believe in such things. If she took Urthha as her own, it would bestow on her the right to galactic power in the eyes of rival powers. Better still, with the Infinity Gate's destructive capabilities, she could hold entire systems hostage.

It was decided. She need only keep the planet out of reach of her opponents. Fear would ensure that her adversaries would think twice before attempting to oppose her, but fear alone would not suffice to maintain order. The lesser beings needed something to look up to. It was for this reason that Tilotny had passed herself off as one of several goddesses apposite to her worshippers. Seeing the benefit of appropriating these, Thargorograht's servants had earlier been tasked with co-opting these various personas for their mistress, but the competition was formidable. The Shadow Council, in tandem with the cults of Typhojem and Ooradryl, had long before started the spread of diverse creation myths and religions that the many races had by this time incorporated fully or borrowed aspects from.

The Ooradryl cults were altogether weird but far more transparent, offering immediate rewards at high risks, for which reason they attracted the desperate and ignorant, of which there were plenty to sate the Kindred for millennia.

Typhojem's cults were another matter entirely. His priests had invented a complex pantheon—which she and Ooradryl were notably absent from, though one of the priests she tortured insisted that, "You and he are from another line than our Shadow Father… or it may be that you've been amalgamated with one or more of the other deities, perhaps Abho—!" Despite how bitter he tasted, she made sure to devour the fool slowly. She hated the priests as much as their forebear, though they had cleverly weaved subversion and horror around a pretense of antiquity, pedigree, and connected myth.

But the social, economic, and political myths promulgated in secret by the Shadow Council were the most insidious. They had been agents of propaganda in the prior wars, knowing well how to convince the commonfolk to act against their better interests. While their religious myths were akin to the Typhojem cults with some variations, their secular and cultural narrative—intended to appeal to the pragmatism, greed, and power-lust of sapients—had affected long-term galactic change.

"Galactic rule by the Night Queen will be different!" she said to her thousands of adoring flutterers and crawlers. "I require no mendacity to keep the galaxy in line, as do the Sith! I and my Eldest Daughters will impose order while our loyal disciples enforce it. And there will be food aplenty for my children unto the nth generation! I require no blind rubes and empty promises as Ooradryl does from his flocks. I will keep my word to enemies and allies alike! I require no cosmicist philosophy and hoary folklore to terrify the faithful and faithless as Typhojem had. I myself will accomplish this as I have for millennia in Illathurion! Am I not the Matriarch of the Swarm?"

THE SUPREMACY OF THE SWARM

Although she reigned over massive forces that would ensure her undisputed rule against any who might try to move in opposition to her, it would be wiser to build power in secret until the time was right. With Typhojem destroyed and Mnggal-Mnggal trapped in the Western Regions, only the Kindred remained to oppose her, and they were problematic, for there were few who could deny their gluttonous offspring when they roamed unchecked throughout Illathurion bleeding worlds dry.

As it currently stood, Urthha remained hostile to life, forsaken and desolate, an object of horror to all the planets in its system. This was good, as not many would waste their time on a world devoid of food sources. *But what if another learned of the Infinity Gate?* She put aside her paranoia, a useless emotion. Once Urthha was healed, the extant Star Temple would require considerable defenses against all who might seek to supplant her, but this was yet years ahead. Impelled to take a calculated risk, she descended into the lethal lair of the Colossus Wasps to secure their aid.

The Royal Comb of the Ythill Queens was loud with the bustle of activity. As dominant as Thargorograht was, nothing but death would come between a queens' duties to the life-cycle of their nests—*but that was as it should be.* As it was late summer, it was a more leisurely time for them and they readily gave her an audience. Upon hearing of her plans, the queens—who knew about such things—informed her that they could easily transfer the planet. "But a world so ravaged by mad sorcery and black science will have to heal before your people could safely dwell upon it," the Ythill Queen Arreyeya stated. "And not even you or your Wizards' weavings can speed up the harvest." Thargorograht had surmised as much. Foul and strange as the

gluttonous hordes of the Old Ones were, they were still physical beings, and the power to heal sentients, let alone a planetary body, was not one they'd cultivated.

But the Night Queen recalled in her impenetrable, eidetic mind that there had been some from the before-days. "Amongst the Elder Races were some who had this power."

"Most are now dead or greatly diminished… but there are likely some yet living who might achieve this." Queen Arreyeya confirmed.

Satisfied, the Night Queen departed, and all her flurried cloud of attendants whirred about pleased that their mistress was pleased. And so Urthha was removed from orbit and transferred. The peoples of the solar system wondered at this new terror. But the Ythill Queens had not lived this long by being greed, and they let them be. Set in a lonely region in Illathurion, southeast of the Ghooric Zone, far from prying eyes, near to a coal-red sun whose wary gaze exuded sufficient light and heat, the queens left Urthha, content at their work, and flew off back their own nests.

Knowing the abiding loyalty of her personal servitors, Thargorograht now called to them. Buzzing and roaring in joy they came. She explained what it was she required. Immediately, they acquiesced. They had little desire to leave their mistress' side, but the need was great, and she had sufficient protection.

Thargorograht had, of course, countless servitors, but the Disciples of the Night Spirit were special. They were arranged by hierarchies under vassal queens who served Thargorograht or even her Daughters, but their loyalty was first and foremost to her, and thinking them spies for their Mother, most sent them back after a job they required from them was complete.

The Builder class expanded and constructed burrows in the Great Black Nest.

The Warrior class defended them and their vassal queens. Votaries served as attendants and were employed for pleasure and procreative purposes—many of whom she devoured when she was finished with them; there were countless of these, though particularly useful ones were kept alive to serve other roles.

The Wizard class advanced the order by means of their thaumaturgical prowess, conquering, subduing, and destroying where needed. The King of the Night Spirit was not the mate of any of the queens—who were free to take whomever they would from any race (these did not become kings)—but was rather the title given to the greatest of the Wizards of the Night Spirit.

Three task forces were now set aside for three important missions.

The first was drawn from the Warrior and Wizard classes and were now classed as the Hunters of the Night Spirit. Distinguished by their black and red coloring, they were to find and bring to her one of the Elder Races who could heal Urthha.

The second task would be given to the Dark Nest. Their job was to discreetly gather new and former allies for the coming war and return of their rightful queen, conveying the message that great power and authority would be granted those who obeyed but vengeance and destruction to those who did not. While some of those forces would be eager to rise up with their mistress and settle old scores, others would be less inclined to join her so long as she remained hidden in the shadows of Otherspace. At some point, she herself would have to emerge to set fear in their hearts.

The third task force was led by the shapeshifting Wizards of the Night Spirit. Distinguished by their purple coloring, their mission was to prepare the first of her Skyriver worlds upon which her servants might dwell. It could not be just any world,

as it would be looked upon as weak if the conquered planet belonged to one of the lesser races. To best establish dominance amongst the great powers that yet roved and routed in the galactic spheres, a Firstborn world would be selected and a Firstborn race defeated. Stealth was required here, for she did not want to rouse up galactic opposition while she was yet gathering her forces and assets.

One of her Eldest Daughters would go with them to rule. Of the worlds the Eldritch Powers had bequeathed to Thargorograht, the paradisiac Tana moon was the one chosen by Moragarom, who was looking to stretch beyond the gloomy expanse of Illathurion. Thereby granted the high title of Vassal Queen of the Night Spirit, Moragarom went forth. Thargorograht used the Shadow Stone to shift two of Tana's moons, what were later called Sistermoon and Brothermoon, causing a temporary wormhole to open to the Moddell Sector sufficient for their vessel to pass through.

The Vassal Queen alighted on Lesser Tana astride her Mantigrue with a small army at her back: Wizards of the Night Spirit, Griagh, Kradaks, Blogs, Gloks, Zombas, Frosch, Ploobs, Kreegons, Divtos, Octucors, Skee, Rakazzak, Gorax, Great Flying Snakes, Rearing Spiders, and Raich—all of whom were terrible to behold![177] She would employ her shapeshifting abilities to infiltrate the Precursor civilization that dwelt there and exploit their weaknesses. And when the time was right, she would unleash death upon them!

[THIS SECTION ACCESSED AND READ IN MANUSCRIPT READING IV]

The myriads of the Dark Nest embarked upon the aggregation of savage races who would fight for the rightful goddess of the galaxy. Although the Old Ones had fallen into the province of myth, mention of the Night Queen still quickened the heart. That and the Dark Nest were enough to lure the slavering for the spoils or who wished to be on the winning side when the Old One returned to claim the galactic throne. And the Nytocris remembered their mistress and were eager to carry out her vengeance with pain and death.

The thoroughly wicked Zanibar declared that they were ready and willing to serve the Queen of Illathurion. Upon desolate Xoth, they once offered sacrifice to Xoth-Ommog, known elsewhere as Mhu'anThul, but as his malefic gaze would fall no longer upon them, they agreed to spread outward in their silent, dark ships…

A violent and savage people given to even worse butchery than the Sith, with Typhojem and the Dweller in the Depths brought to ruin, that blighted horde had made war on one another as much as upon the free peoples of the galaxy, but in this they felt consecrated by the Darkness, as High Priestess Voodenne Idellist oft recited, "The Shadow Father ever demands the feast of war, and to the Dark Gods that watch, the blood of the faithful is as sweet as the blood of the enemy…"

[177] Some of these names are original to Illathurion; others are of ancient Indur nomenclature. The Gloks, or Glok Monsters are kin to the Finned Blaggart and of the same family of giant serpents that include the Anakkona, Najarkan Wilderbeast, Dagobah Python, Maritima, Sandworm, Reel, and more. The Great Flying Snake, however, is kin to the Arrak. The Ploob was a mercifully rare, green-tongued predator that some called the Poob.

So, as the sons of Sithlan, the Zanibar saw conflict as the crucible by which life was flayed into a shape worthy of its being. But in this one area they were akin to other races: they wished for an offspring race of their own. They would pay the Ankath generously to genetically engineer from Zanibar and Kathol DNA (taken on Yavin 4 during their earlier conflict) this offspring race, and it was a mark of great pride for them when the Lich Kings succeeded. They reared the Jokath much in the ways of flagitious and devious craft and furnished for them great weapons of war and celestial forges to rival those of the Rakata with whom they competed for dominance as the favoured builders of the Ancient Ones. Other than that, they did not interfere.

This mysterious Jokath would long bide their time in the wildest western reaches of the galaxy, experimenting and testing the Precursor technology the Zanibar had uncovered on Amtor in conjunction with the piece of Abominor they'd acquired, and so evolved their complex society dominated by men of science or men of war.

THE CRIME AND PUNISHMENT OF THE KASHI MER

As the Night Queen had decreed, any who failed to heed her call would be punished as an example. Foremost amongst this number was the Kashi Mer Dynasty.

The Kashi Mer had once been amongst the most assiduous servants of the Dark Powers, but no more. In the intervening aeons, they had turned aside from the beliefs and practices of their ancestors, and any who sought to revive them were imprisoned, executed, or sent into exile. With many emboldened by their steadfast example, the legacy of the Kashi Mer had changed to one of nobility in the face of an evil past.

"If they will not serve the Night Queen, they will serve the night in another way and pay the price of disobedience," asserted Ukunuku, the leader of the Dark Nest, sending the horrific Gethul and a ghastly army of Mugaari to ensure the end of their civilization. But in a surprise turnabout, the Humans drove back their invaders!

"If they do not fall in battle," sibilated Thargorograht, "they will be eradicated in a less *noble* way." Founded on a tactic her hated sibling had employed, she commanded her allies to send their abominations to wipe out the suns of all the races who'd betrayed her. This led to the devastation of the Neonar of Neona, the Tarmians of Sarm, the Forneus of Forntay, the Columi of Colu, the Kerestians of Kerest, the Lupine of Lupal, and the Averne of Avernio III. [178]

For Kashi, it meant the coming of Adro. Adro was a sapient droid constructed by the Zanibar from the Abominor piece they'd acquired that served as an early prototype of their Ajogun droids (and later for the Jokath's Six Gods).

To counter this threat and save their people, the seven Ashe Lords of Kashi sacrificed themselves in a life-bond with the Starbird of their sun Orixa. The Starbird reduced the droid to its malevolent essence which now took the form of a pyramidal, grey prism over which the spirits of the Ashe Lords would keep guard, serving as a seal. So long as the Orixa Talisman, as it was now called, remained within the system, Adro would be trapped and Kashi spared.

[178] With long bodies, wide mouths, and two pairs of arms ending in suckers, the Averne are rarely spotted in the galaxy today. One famous member joined the RLS *Legacy* as a pirate.

Thousands of years later, the Talisman had passed down the line of the Guardians of the Breath, as the Royal Priesthood was called, until it came to a member that had no children, at which point the Talisman found its way to the Royal Museum.

Reda Jalooz hailed from Arda-2. She'd come to Kashi as part of a group of students from Ossus to study the history of the Kashi Mer Dynasty and their relationship with the Force. Having recently suffered the death of a parent and breakup of a relationship, Jalooz hoped to get her mind off her problems by delving into work. By day, she was successful enough. But at night, she fell into abject melancholy.

When Reda came upon the Orixa Talisman in the Royal Museum of Zringar, she felt joy for the first time in a long time. It wasn't the amusing legend written on the placard, which she didn't believe, but the object itself that spoke to her. Now, instead of ruminating, her thoughts were of beauty and wonder, and she felt free.

Every day she visited it, and every night she dreamt of it. But the time had come to return to school. Reda went back to the museum to gaze upon the dark grey prism one last time before she left. And there it all might have ended had not the opportunity strangely presented itself. *Take me with you*, the talisman seemed to say.

Suddenly, the thought of leaving without it seemed too much to bear. She again read the placard and its fabulous story of Adro and the Starbird of Orixa, and for a brief moment she saw the seven stentorian Ashe Lords warning her, but then she laughed and the vision faded. *Take me with you.* Looking about, she could see not a guard or worker in sight, and, even odder, there were no security cams in the room. *Take me with you.* No one came to see the gem any longer, she reasoned. The museum must not even care about it or they'd have it better protected. She would keep it only for a short while and then anonymously send it back. It was in her pocket before she knew it.

Reda couldn't believe what she'd done, but she was even more excited to unwrap her prize. The moment she entered her room, she pulled out the gem, gently caressing its cool surface. She felt endowed with a terrific sense of power; but even as she reveled in it, it struck her as odd that the gem was no longer dark and angular but bright and smooth. *I'll think about that later*, she thought as she put it away; an hour had passed in what seemed like only seconds, and she could not be late for her flight.

Before Reda even made it back to Ossus, her fascination with the stone passed, and she felt shame and incredulity at her bizarre actions. With this came no small anxiety as to what would happen if it was discovered that she was the thief. Worse, she was beset by dark dreams and visions in which the spirits of the Ashe Lords urged her to return the Talisman before it was too late. The urgency with which she felt the need to get back to Kashi meant that she couldn't simply ship the invaluable artifact back, and she resolved to return it in person, explain the insanity that had overcome her, and face the consequences.

But the mundane realities of school, work, and other distractions prevented her from returning straightaway. Even after the visions faded in grief, she was determined to do whatever it took to make things right. When finally she booked passage, she did so feeling foolish, amazed at what stress and her imagination had done to her.

She couldn't believe her good fortune when upon handing it to the first Royal Macheteros she spotted, he indicated without speaking that she should go. Expressing her relief and gratitude, she hurried off. A short time later, she imagined that this was too good to be true and that just maybe they were following her to see what

other crimes this master-thief might get up to. So she again booked a room in neighboring Jamu, thinking it best to be apprehended while still on Kashi rather than Ossus where she'd be publicly humiliated.

The Royal Macheteros who'd been given the Orixa Talisman by Reda Jalooz was Amyntos Pella, and he would not return it to the museum but send it instead to his son, Phylip, then imprisoned on Argai. Phylip could use it to pay ransom to the King of Cron who'd hired the Overseers of the GenoHaradan to get him out of the way, as he'd gotten involved in a political fracas with the fracturing Kingdom of Cron. But in a rapid upheaval, events turned in Phylip's favor, and with his training as one of the Royal Macheteros, he took Argai at the very moment that the GenoHaradan chose his same side, assuring the Core Worlds that the Tionese successors of the Kingdom of Cron would join their soon-to-be Galactic Republic.

Reda Jalooz would never return to Ossus. The Orixa Talisman had been too long off of Kashi, and the Ashe Lords were powerless to stop Adro from fulfilling his ancient mission as he penetrated the heart of Orixa, which flamed into a supernova, destroying Kashi four hundred and fifty years after the Republic's formation.

Grieved and embittered by the loss of his world, Phylip passed the Orixa Talisman to his son, Xendor, whom he trained in all the ways of the now-extinct Royal Macheteros, teaching him as well about the ancient forbidden lore of the Kashi Mer, which fascinated the Force-sensitive boy.

INTO THE GREAT BLACK NEST

One of the greatest betrayals of Thargorograht was that of the Ssither, who declared that they and the Sith would no longer serve as emissaries to vermin masquerading as gods! When the Kissai protested, they bestowed unto the Ninûshwodzakut the abominable secret of the Ankath's eternality that had been hidden by them long before when the Kissai first thought they could manage affairs without them. Calling it the "Bequest of Xanxathotep," the Ssither altered the political and religious structure of Drômencas, tossing aside the role of the Kissai for the Lich Lords.

Raised in a conservative household by those who were assiduous in their religious observance of the Immortal Gods and Old Ones, Lord Soros was an astute and skilled Sith artisan descended from the original Ninûsgidzida. Greatly disturbed by the blasphemous implications of the Ssither's maneuvering but even more disturbed by those who went along with it, he set out to right the wrongs being committed.

After numerous attempts to better understand what was happening and why were met with stony silence, appeals to authority, and, finally, the threat of sedition charges, he decided on a more extreme course. On a moonless night, doused in the *thil* herbs that would disguise his scent and garbed all in black, save for his feet which were left bare, he traveled in stealth through the predator-infested forest to the forbidden ziggurat on the peak of Mount Zhyrion. Upon it he braved the Grand Temple of Bathon wherein could be found the legendary Infernal Gate. The terrors he endured in the demon-haunted temple were but augurs of the nightmares yet to come, but boldly he pressed on, and with the spilt blood of the guards he faced in battle and slaughtered, he crossed into the black portal.

His journey through Illathurion was as that of an unending kaleidoscope of horrors, but no matter the tortures inflicted upon him by its bizarre and never-imagined beings, he kept repeating his demand to see the Night Queen, insisting he would give his information to no other. At last, barely sane, he was granted his request and taken within the mandibles of some indefinable insectoid that scurried rapidly down the twilit tunnels, across unnumbered, infrangible strands of the Great Web to the inconceivably vast Black Nest until finally being deposited deep within the court of the boundless and malevolent Night Queen.

The Great Black Nest was comprised of hundreds of planets, suns, and moons sinuously strewn together with a vast interweave of passageways, chambers, and tunnels constructed of indestructible material that connected endless burrows, twisting channels, and deadly lairs in which buzzed and crept the millions of Nytocris and things too fantastical to be believed. Along with massive regions for carrion, storage, eggs, and wriggling spawn in their various larval stages, there were the horrendous Coprophage Chambers where the Guanomongers and others fed.

In her awful obsidian throne room, Thargorograht sprawled like a blot of black and red with an indecent amount of eyes and legs. Feverish and reduced to skin and bones, Soros was brought before her and on bended knee delivered the news of the Ssither's refusal to answer the call, intent to separate, and goal of usurping the gods.

The heaving mass that was the Night Queen chittered: "You have traveled far and weathered much to bring me this grim news." Her many red eyes penetrated Soros' mind. He was dazzled by her immensity, so profane and sprawling he could not tell where she ended and the darkness began. "Why risk torment and death to tell me this?"

"Because *you* are our queen," he croaked, hanging onto life by a thread, "the Goddess of Night established by the Immortal Gods to rule and reward as you see fit."

Several moments passed before he could hear the telltale stridulation and hideous clicks of mandibles: "To have endured so much, you must have considerable strength," she stated ominously. "I would indeed reward you with great honor, for I have use of one such as you; though it is unlikely you will survive. Few before you have."

"Do as you will. All that matters is to serve…" Then he passed out.

With that, she had chambers prepared for him where he would be rested and fattened. *Could it be that this ragged, red-skinned being is the very Champion I've been searching for all these years?*

It took nearly a month, for she would not rush matters, and when he was again brought before her, he stood as one hale and proud. At this time, Ukunuku, the strongest warrior of the Dark Nest, was also summoned. He too had volunteered to participate in what the Night Queen called the Great Unveiling.

An audience of various Daughters gathered with heaving mounds of the Nytocris to watch the spell she would weave with the aid of the Stone of Shadow, a transformation that would, if all went well, fuse the two into one great, conjoined Champion who would wield the trebled powers of both and serve her devotedly.

Thargorograht was uncertain as to which of the two minds would emerge dominant. Though it was unlikely such incongruent personalities and biologies would meld, there was the danger of both shattering, which would make the creature useless for her purposes, as had been the case with many she'd tested before.

The one transformation that had succeeded was a Kubaz-Killik fusion. The Kubaz personality had won out, but he was unable to maintain the Killik's *joining* powers which were crucial for her goals and the main purpose of the endeavour. Nonetheless, the mutated creature, Atravis, was awarded the Bright Star, which was the crystal offspring of the Shadow Stone. Atravis and his four mates and spawn had then been sent to Mustafar, where they would serve her in other ways.

Bets were placed, with many favoring the great Ukunuku but some preferring the courageous newcomer. In the end, the pneuma of Soros won out over Ukunuku, whose personality dissipated, leaving only his crucial knowledge and power—including that of *joining*—to be utilized by Soros. An obscene mixture of Killik and Sith, Soros was renamed *Ukusorosuku* by the Dark Nest and later Daritha Soros by the Rakata. Crawling forward, he bowed his crimson head before his beloved Queen.

"You are my Champion," Thargorograht said. "Through you, the Celestials will be brought to their knees!" She presented her guests with a banquet of meats from the benighted worlds, informing them that Ukusorosuku would lead them in battle against the Ssither on Drômencas. As Sith culture followed strength, the destruction of those on top would demonstrate to the populace who to serve; thus, they were to leave the majority of the Sith people alive and target the ancient Lich Kings who supported and were supported by the apostate Serpent Lords.

On wings, legs, and bellies, the armies of the Dark Nest poured out in droves from the Infernal Gate. The shocked Ssither did not take long to recover and ordered the blowing of the death whistles as they began launching their most loathsome incantations. But the noise of the swarms drowned them out. To counteract this, the Lich Kings, who deemed themselves immortal, strode forth brandishing ophidian Staves of Putrefaction and crooked Rods of Abrogation. Their efforts proved victorious at the start, and they laughed as they brought down their creeping, flying, crawling adversaries. But as Thargorograht's legions continued to surge forth without number, their legerdemain began to lose potency and their brittle bones began to creak in exhaustion.

After many days and nights in blood-drenched battle, it dawned on some that their doom was at hand, so the wisest of the Ankath departed for the Gunninga Gap and the Ssither boarded their coiling, meandrous Reptant ships for Jatee in the Demophon system of the Core Worlds. Jatee was an ancient junkyard planet inhabited by giant worms that recycled garbage, and ever since the days of the Dhuvians' dominion, they'd kept it in secret as a colony world, crushing or dominating the few Humans who deigned to establish residence there.

But for the Night Queen, it was not enough for the Ssither to be merely routed; they had to be crushed and humiliated. The Zanibar were again tasked to send one of their monstrous Ajogun droid creations. This time, they sent Gunab to see to it that Jatee's sun collapsed in on itself. But unlike the reformed Kashi Mer, the Ssither were powerful sorcerers, and as one they bent their will against Gunab until they felt that malevolent presence explode.

But Gunab was cleverer than they knew. Although injured and forced to sacrifice his propulsion unit and turbocannons to convince the Serpent Lords that he was, indeed, destroyed, he shut down and slept. Millennia later, he awoke and began the process of rebuilding. At last, he would carry out his mission, sparking the sun to go supernova. The disgraced brood of the Ssither were forced to accept aid in fleeing Jatee

from a government that knew neither them nor their illustrious past, and so they dissimulated and pretended to be nothing more than yet another strange alien species, all the while biding their time, serving as the eyes and ears for their allies, the ancient Ankath, who were now known as the True Sith.

THE NIGHT HERALD

Once the Battle of Drômencas was won and the Synagogue of the Serpent torn down, Thargorograht called telepathically to her Dark Nest (being amongst those races for whom she needed no intercessor) and proclaimed Ukusorosuku the Night Herald, commanding him to establish dominion over all of the Esstran sector, beginning with the enclosed nebulosity of the Stygian Caldera in which floated the haunted Sith Worlds, each of which had been dedicated to one of the Immortal Gods, with Drômencas, or *Dromund Kaas*, as Daritha Soros now called it, reserved for the unseen Father of Shadows. The other sacred worlds included: Rhelg, Khar Delba, Ziost, Krayiss II, and Korriban.

Wielding his trapezoidal holocron, his gift from the Night Queen, and taking charge of the Stygian Caldera, Soros helped to re-establish the ancient lore, magic, and profane secrets of the Eldritch Powers that could be found, much of which was lost over the years or hidden by those who'd disseminated power meagerly in order to bar the rise of potential rivals and prevent access to Lich-destroying incantations.

Reinstituting the Kissai and Massassi caste system to their former positions, Lord Soros instructed them to build in the deepest caverns great tombs into which to secrete their most precious artifacts. This was the Valley of the Sleeping Kings and the Valley of Golg, named after the long dead Lord of Mezzallmech, Mhu'anThul, whose skull had been brought there by the Sith long before.

Through her divinatory strands, Thargorograht discerned that the Sith Empire would play a significant role in the spread of her magnificence to the galaxy. The pertinent question for her now was how it would affect her children and the Great Black Nest upon which she sat. That would take longer to fathom.

It was in those days that the Tuk'ata were first seen and heard in great numbers, with the Sith quivering at the thunder of their stampeding feet, for the demon-dogs were as cunning as they were vicious, and many of Soros' thralls had ridden them into battle. Soros heard Sith tales of the beasts' depraved origins, claiming that Typhojem had alighted upon Korriban in its once-lush youth and bred with the beasts of the field, begetting the first and greatest of the Tuk'ata Queens, whom he named Jatayus, the Mother of All Hellhounds. But this was a fable. The Sith here and abroad held a special affinity for Typhojem, and even during the rule of the Lich Kings, his ineffable name was roared amongst the rabid hordes as Ulah-tek. Newer versions claimed that Jatayus and the Tuk'ata Hellhounds descended from Thargorograht through her Daughter, Tocatltacot, who had come with Daritha Soros' forces to the Battle of Drômencas, though who their fathers were, none could say. The oldest tales said they came from the far-off plains of Leng, though none knew where that lay, but the Tuk'ata only grinned cruelly when asked, for they did not reveal their secrets.

Percipience glittered eerily behind Jatayus' uncanny erubescent orbs, enlarged teeth, and batlike wings as she stood with Ukusorosuku during a particularly sanguinary campaign. With their cloven hooves split into lethal claws and tusks bent into

vicious weapons of war, the gargantuan Tuk'ata Queens and their offspring worked much evil across their millennia of life. Worshipped by the Dashade as Mistress Death, a fitting appelation, from Jatayus and her longeval progeny sprung all manner of aberrant abominations: Sith hounds of Korriban; Dread Beasts of Oricon; Greatmaws of Balmorra; Salky hounds of Coruscant; monstrous Hounds of Ziost; Huntbeasts of Lehon; Warhounds of Alderaan; Bog Snarlers of Nal Hutta; Spirit Beasts of Voss; Akk dogs of Haruun Kal; dread Maulers; Bonegnawer Hounds of Belsavis; and the flame-spitting tech-monsters and elder fighting beasts of Nar Shaddaa.

After several years in which the Sith worlds were firmly entrenched in her webs, the Unseen Queen called to Lord Soros to prepare for her coming, as she would now go forth into the galaxy to unlock the Celestial seals, for though her forces could easily enter the Forbidden Regions, none could leave. The seal of Illathurion had already been breached when first she sent out her forces, and now, away from prying eyes, she came to Skyriver, careful not to arouse the suspicions of enemies or allies alike.

The Disciples of the Night Spirit, trusted above all, told any who inquired that their Mistress had gone upon the Great Web of Gorog into Oneirichor to conduct important matters there. This was readily believed, as that realm was a potent and bizarre one that held hidden portals to other spheres and was unconquered by the Grey Weavers.

The Neuter caste of the Rakaan and their Terentateks were the last to have departed their original homeworld of Ka'jk'z to venture into Oneirichor, and they had not been seen since. Thargorograht didn't grieve the loss; the remaining ones who dwelt on Rakaa IV could rot as far as she was concerned, for though they ostensibly paid her heed as the goddess Thrig'ki, she knew that in secret they venerated both the Killiks and the Ancient Ones above her.

The Night Queen now passed before Lesser Tana, but displeased with the lack of progress she saw there, she moved on to other areas. Her cancerous sibling, Mnggal-Mnggal, had proved a problem in the Forbidden Zones, but his attempt to expand his sphere of influence beyond Viisymel had been thwarted by the Ones, who scorched the surface of that dead world. He was best left on Mortigan until she was certain of the Infinity's Gate's efficacy, as that would be an unequivocal means of eliminating him.

Like a deathwind she descended on the Stygian Caldera, breaching the seal that kept her servants locked in the Esstran Sector. Upon seeing that fantastically massive black mass of arciform corpulence with a thousand legs and a myriad crimson eyes, many died of sheer fright, for to look upon her was to look upon madness. Many more were sacrificed in blood rituals to honor the return of the Jen'ari and feed the mortiferous hordes that swarmed about her. Wielding the precious Stone of Shadow, she unlocked the seal but commanded them to wait for her signal before departing the region.

Before returning to her throne, she handed to Lord Soros her most-precious item, the Stone of Shadow: "Depart now for Tana the Lesser," she instructed. "Bring *this* to my Eldest Daughter there, for I have seen that the Monitors who dwell upon that world are more powerful than first anticipated, and she will have need of it in the war to come. Hone your own powers in the caverns beneath Kabus-Dabeh on Muzara. In the deepest pits of Iloptryfae, gather the apoptotic warlocks to serve as your Hands in the Caldera. When you have accomplished this, go to the Killik nests on Alsakan. *Make yourself known!* They will come to serve you as you came to serve me! Await my signal. Then, send forth the legions!"

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

HIBERNAL TALES FROM THE ENDOR MOON

LONG LIVE THE VASSAL QUEEN OF THE NIGHT SPIRIT

When Moragarom, the Vassal Queen of the Night Spirit, and her monstrous servants arrived on Tana the Lesser, she commanded them to kill any resistance they met, a distraction that would buy her time to survey the Indur civilization and see to the best means of eliminating her opposition. They did not seem like formidable foes, but she had learned from years of experience that when it came to the Precursors, appearances could be deceiving.

The Ruling Council of the Indur had not been unprepared. As self-appointed Watchers of the Skies, they had observed the incursion of that immense vitiate force from the nearby Endor Gate and sent out emissaries to alert their offspring and Firstborn siblings.

The Protectors of Tana stormed forth, surprising the raiders who, despite their mistresses' warning, had not expected opposition from so powerful and varied a force. Fierce battles raged across the continents, with many of the invaders coming close to being eradicated before fleeing to find shelter in caves, deserts, and deeper parts of the forest. From one of these captured creatures the Protectors learned that the Vassal Queen of the Night Spirit was at large upon their world. The Ruling Council of the Indur warned the Monitors and Protectors to be vigilant. Yet, after many months of vain searching, the hunting parties returned to the business of living their lives and returned to their homes, assuming she was dead or departed.

Shrewdly had Moragarom altered her appearance to evade detection. With so many of her forces in retreat, knowledge would be even more crucial than before. During this period, she traveled to the Great Eastern Forest of Linden (which would many years later be renamed Morah), west of the Gorax Highlands and south of the Snow Palace. There, she set up the protective walls and thickets of her new home within what would come to be called the Forest of Thorns, weaving incantations to keep intruders at bay.

Stagorr was an Ikil sentinel, one of the hoarfrost creatures created by the Indur to assist the Winter Monitor, Boreacubra the Snow King. When word reached Stagorr's ears from passing Skandits of a strange place in the southern part of East Linden that they were unable to explore, he believed he'd find the wicked queen they'd hunted.

Competitive, driven, and looking to set himself above the other Ikil sentinels, he traveled alone to the location the Skandits had demarcated. It indeed proved difficult to penetrate, not solely due to the thick brush of trees and Raventhorn plants but by what he realized had to be some kind of protection spell. Unwilling to give up, he forged ahead, carving a path through the foliage until he came upon a large cottage.

MORAG MEETS THE SENTINEL OF THE SNOW KING

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Putting aside basic manners, Stagorr burst inside, weapons drawn… only to come upon a sight he hadn't expected, for there in shock and outrage stood a beautiful female not too dissimilar from the Ikil noblewomen he knew from court but considerably more exotic, which made her all the more striking to his eyes. Her expression of distress, however, gave him pause at his rash behavior. Recovering himself, he apologized, introduced himself, and explained that he was one of the Ikil sentinels tasked to find a dangerous adversary that he assumed lived at this domicile.

She visibly relaxed and introduced herself. "I am Lindronnigen, she replied. "I have seen no other since I arrived these long weeks ago, apart from the friendly forest creatures and now yourself." Upon his query, she added. "We crash-landed many kilometers away. I am the sole survivor of a party of Frost Sprites from Akuria II who fled the War of the Elder Races." He thought that was oddly phrased. "I then made my way on foot to this abandoned hovel, cleaned it up, and here I have remained."

"Pardon my impertinence, but why did your party leave your world? Most who do are warriors or exiles. You do not look like a warrior and Akuria II has not been invaded as far as I know, though news of the river beyond Tana is slow to arrive."

"We had gained some renown as singers," Lindronnigen said demurely. "Our voices are said to have a magical healing effect, which makes us valuable assets in these troubling times. I can perform a short piece for you if you'd like."

Stagorr wasn't sure what to think. Perhaps it was true. On the other hand, it might be a ploy—he'd read stories of such things. But looking at her earnest face and feeling his suspicions silly, he laughed and said, "I would certainly like to hear a song."

She sang, and indeed her voice was as angelic and enchanting as the melody was haunting. It was no wonder they'd gained such fame. He began to nod off after a time, but reproaching himself for acting the cub, he fought it off. When she finished, far too soon as far as he was concerned, he acknowledged that he actually did feel better. "Will you come back to the capital with me? They would surely love to hear your voice at court."

"Alas, you are kind, but your people are strangers to me, and I am but alone."

"That is wise," he acknowledged. "The forests and valleys of Lesser Tana are abundant with delicious fruits and vegetables, but as you are unfamiliar with them, I shall provide you succor in your time of need."

With a coy smile, she agreed, and as effortlessly as that, he became a weekly visitor, bearing various foodstuffs and supplies. Without exception she was always ready with a meal and a smile and sometimes a song. He convinced himself that in time he would discern the truth about her. If she were the Vassal Queen of the Night Spirit, he would arrest her. But if not….

Moragarom had, of course, known of the coming of the Ikil sentinel and prepared a reasonable story to match the form she suspected he'd find appealing. Her instincts had proven correct. Still, as Lindronnigen, she found that she welcomed Stagorr's visits, which grew longer as they became better acquainted. She'd studied the outside world

and visited numerous planets, but only ever as a conqueror or emissary. Actually living and interacting with the inhabitants was a whole other matter. And on a land as peaceful and abundant as this, she understood why some of her kind had "gone native."

As time passed, and they grew comfortable with one another, she began teaching him other "gifts of the Frost Sprites," as she called her powers, while also discussing her beliefs and the reasons why she felt that strict order was necessary to curtail the chaos of the many unwise beings who were always asserting their will and bringing about problems in the galaxy. "If even the beasts have cause to fear Man, what hope is there for the night creatures and the poor insects that rove about minding their own affairs, seeking only food and shelter? My mother often told me that perhaps things might be different if Humans had never come to this galaxy, but come they did, and now their influence has spread the universe over…"

Stagorr was surprised to find himself in agreement with her perspective. "I cannot speak to the universe, for all my time has been spent on *this* world, but the Protectors of Tana have great concern for those who are smaller and weaker than they. So long as it is within our power, we do not harm them and will defend them against threats. Even this past week we heard tell of a vicious Divto hunting a village of Mimphs!" When she inquired of what these were, he explained that the latter were akin to mice but sapient, whereas the former was a three-headed serpent. She forced herself to remain still as he described one of the creatures she'd brought with her.

"Would not *all* of the snakes on your world normally eat mice?" she inquired. "Or mice-like creatures, since they cannot tell them apart?"

"I don't know how it is on Akuria II," he replied, "but on Lesser Tana, the Progenitors did not fashion the beasts to eat one another. This was once true across the galaxy, but much has changed in the infinite whirling of the stars since the wars began."

"I admit I do not know much of the galaxy's ancient history, but in my realm, there is a delicate balance. Our people merely wish to see that balance maintained."

Stagorr found that he enjoyed their time together far more than he'd anticipated. After the strict etiquette and formalities of court life—not to mention the tiresome coquetries of the noblewomen of the Ikil—Lindronnigen and her odd ideas and customs were a breath of fresh air.

Finally, after several months had passed in this manner, he asked her: "Have you placed a love spell on me? I have heard of such things from the old books given to us by the Indur."

"Such might be a tactic my mother might employ," she admitted with a playful grin, "or so the rumors say. But no, I have not. Perhaps you have placed one on me?"

That took him over the edge. Then and there, he proclaimed his deepest affections for her. She, in turn, acknowledged her own for him.

She was surprised to find she actually felt them!

DAY OF THE STRANGER

♏

It was at this time, while Stagorr was out gathering mushrooms, berries, and other foodstuffs for them in the surrounding forest, that the mutant monstrosity that was Lord Soros appeared at Lindronnigen's door.

Teeth clicking like mandibles, the crimson tentacles of his Sith cranium quivering above the rugose malignancy of his ruinous insectoid frame, the monstrous Sith Lord stood before the Daughter of his mistress: "I am the Herald of the Night Queen," he began without prelude. She stared as if shaken out of a dream before remembering herself and realizing that her mother's trials must have borne fruit. "I have been sent to bring you succor and additional arms in your battle against the Monitors." With a smirk that made him appear even uglier, he added, "I do not believe she is aware of your current… *arrangement*."

"It is not your *place* to presume," she retorted angrily after collecting her wits, refusing to extend the Indurian courtesy of inviting him inside. Anger was a feeling she hadn't felt or expressed in what seemed like an age, but this smug interloper brought it out of her. "And I am in no need of *succor* or additional arms. Return now to whatever world from which you came, and do not return here again!"

"My service extends to you, *Vassal Queen*," he replied, pointedly reminding her of her place in the hierarchy, "but *your mother alone* is my Mistress, and it is *her* commands that I follow." When Lindronnigen did not respond, he pressed on, "You are in no danger of being discovered, for I saw your creature some distance away."

"I will not repeat myself," she said with a quietness that made clear her intent. "If you do not depart, my Mother will have to find a new Herald."

Lord Soros brayed as if that was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. Lindronnigen anxiously looked about to make sure no one was in earshot. "There are many heralds, but *I* am *one-of-a-kind*," he said with casual confidence. "Nonetheless, I will leave you with *this*, for it is the primary reason I was sent. You will find it useful, I think." He handed her a staff. Upon it rested a most precious gem.

"The Stone of Shadow!" Lindronnigen gasped, carefully taking it from his grasp. Indeed, this *Lord Soros* must be valuable for her mother to have granted it to him even for a short time. "The time must be near!"

"You yet have time for your… *domestic affairs*," he said with a thinly disguised sneer, "for I depart now for Alsakasla. Do not forsake the staff, for it has great powers in its own right!"[179]

"Of course," she retorted, choosing to ignore his offense. He was a repulsive, boorish thing, but she could sense his power and knew he might yet prove useful. Regardless, she wanted nothing more than for him to leave. "We await her signal."

"Perhaps I will see you again when the battle commences… for I too would like to spend some time with the great *Moragoram*!" Knowing that she would not respond to so vulgar a remark, he turned and walked off cackling.

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[179] Alsakasla was the ancient Killik word for Alsakan.

She'd been a fool to have been caught off-guard. But what was done was done. She had come here with a purpose. Yet, in her hearts, she knew that she'd fallen in love with Stagorr. Contrary to Lord Soros' hints, her mother would not care about this. Queens were free to choose any mates that they desired… Nevertheless, it was true that the Night Queen would be displeased to know she actually held *affection* for this one, for the Daughters of Thargorograht did not involve themselves in romantic entanglements. Such quaint notions were affairs of the lesser races. Queens took what they wanted and discarded the rest. But here she was, worrying that once the truth was known, as soon it must be, Stagorr would depart from her. Could she kill him if such a thing transpired, as it seemed very well likely to?

Stagorr returned home some hours later with sacks filled-to-capacity with various types of food. Discerning her changed mien, he inquired as to what had happened in his absence. Composing herself, she calmly stated, "I was frightened by strange sounds in the woods. I'm being silly, I'm sure. Let us prepare a feast fit for a king."

"Begin without me," Stagorr stated, suddenly vigilant. He stormed off, as she knew he would. The strange footprints and scents from a creature that was not native to their world confirmed his fears that some manner of fiend had been about.

When he returned to the house sometime later, he told her of his discovery and relief that whatever it was that had been prowling about was long gone: "There are things on our world now that do not belong and would bring you harm. *I will never allow you to come to harm!*"

For her part, Lindronnigen couldn't help but smile.

THE DUCHESS OF SLEET

Stagorr was at a crossroads. He desperately wished to trust Lindronnigen or know if she were merely dissimulating for her own survival or agenda. There would be a way to find out for certain, and now that time was at hand…

"Come," Stagorr said to her one morning. "Pack for a journey of several days."

"Where are we going?" Lindronnigen asked, genuinely surprised. "And what of your duties to the Snow King?"

"King Boreacubra can manage his own affairs," he replied a bit more caustically than he'd intended. "We have our own to attend to." After that, he would say no more, save to smile or wink whenever she asked where they were going.

Across enchanting plains of riotous wildflowers with dazzling scents, through vibrant forests wherein odd and amusing peoples dwelt, the two traveled northwest to the great Fortress of Mynyd the Rock Gnome. Lindronnigen had not traveled as much as she'd intended when first she'd arrived. Truly, this world *was* enchanted, and now she wished for nothing more than to explore it. When Mynyd's jagged castle came into view—jutting up before them as if carved from the western Ailis Mountains themselves—Stagorr took Lindronnigen's hands in his and walked with her down to the nearby Lake of Bae for sustenance and rest.

"This is a beauty I've not seen," she remarked, awed by the splendor around her.

"Does not Akuria II have such beautiful sights?"

"I was not as well-traveled as others…"

"I must ask you this now… And if, indeed, you love me, you will not fear to answer me truthfully."

"Ask what you must," she said, quietly resigned to whatever fate the truth would bring, for she'd already surmised that the unexpected trip was no mere holiday.

"Are you the Vassal Queen of the Night Spirit that I and my people have been hunting these past many months?"

"I think you know that I am," she replied plaintively. "You have long known it, just as you've known my love for you is real and not feigned. None of this was *expected*."

"I needed to hear it from you."

"Does this change things now that you know?"

"No, it does not." One of her hands still in his, he led her to the Fortress of Mynyd where they were permitted into the beautiful, onyx depths of the Rock Gnome's keep.

Mynyd the Rock Gnome was not a Gnome at all, but a Vaathkree who had long before departed his homeworld in search of a better deal for himself. He'd since made a name in these parts as a kind of curate, so that when Stagorr asked him to preside over their marriage, he simply nodded and asked, "What shall you give me in trade?"

Lindronnigen said, "I can train you in the magical arts."

His eyes alit, he replied, "That *is* a good deal!"

The marriage ceremony was held in a majestic sacrarium raised out of diamond and jade. Several of the local residents, having heard of an event, sat in attendance. In those few moments of bliss, Lindronnigen felt free of all politics and war, and the scheming chitterings of her Mother and Sisters seemed like a dim memory from another life. But then a voice intruded into her reverie:

It was wise to marry one so close to the throne, though it is a shame he is not royal himself. You will encourage him to turn against the king and take the Northern Kingdom for yourself. Then, you will gather your hidden forces and wage war against the other three.

"As you say, Mother," was all she could whisper in reply, but to her betrothed who now turned to her, she smothered her bitterness and put on a smile, proceeding forward in the ancient rite. Only now, it felt alien and hollow.

Lindronnigen was true to her word, and over the course of the year, she taught the Rock Gnome enough for him to augment his healing abilities, learn telekinesis, and change his title to Rock Wizard. After that, Stagorr and his bride returned to the domicile she'd made in Linden's Great Eastern Forest.

Later, they produced a child whom they named Odra. He did not return to his duties, preferring instead to live with his family in secret.

Because Odra was a small and sickly infant, Lindronnigen brought her to Mynyd who had healing skills that might improve her health and stature. It achieved the desired results, although it couldn't improve the child's disposition, and as Odra grew older, she fought continually with her mother until at last she came of age and sought to leave her parents' domicile.

On Odra's insistence, Stagorr brought her before King Boreacubra, claiming she was a Frost Sprite who'd crashed on their world and helped him escape from the lair

of the Griagh who had imprisoned him these past years. To sell their invented story, he produced from a large sack the creature's ugly head that Lindronnigen had shaped from a rock. But the Snow King didn't care, so overjoyed was he to see his former bodyguard and relieved to know that he'd survived that he promoted him to Chamberlain. Stagorr accepted the promotion graciously, though he'd long ago lost interest in such things save for this: it gave him the authority to pretty much do as he pleased, allowing him to spend time with his wife with whom his true loyalties lay.

In contrast, Odra's time spent at the palace was considerable. So enamored had King Boreacubra become with the spry maiden, and she with him, that he invented a new position for her: Duchess of Sleet.

In appreciation, she composed this poem for him that she read aloud at court:

> Frost-bound King of Eternity, upon his frozen throne,
> Winter reigns in majesty, an e'er snowswept zone,
> In glacial world of crystal flowers,
> Ages pass in rimy towers,
> Gelid servants, frigid maids,
> Shivering courtiers, sleet parades,
> Tana's snowbound emperor, arctic Kaiser, Lord of Ice,
> Boreal laws of ancient Indur, forged in hoary sacrifice,
> Can wintertide and ice-age dawn,
> Melt in the heat of lover's pawn?
> Can worlds of snow and slush collide,
> In blaze of queenly august bride?

Heartily did the king enjoy the poem, as he did Odra's affection, though he did not quite see the nuances of either, wrapped up as they were in her hopes and dreams that he would make her his queen. In her daydreams and phantasies, she would stand up boldly to her grandmother when she came to lay claim upon the world and demand that her husband's life be spared.

But daydreams were all they would ever be. As enchanted as he was by her, he was legally bound by tradition to marry the eldest of the Ikil noblewomen, Lady Arktos. When Odra discovered this rule from Lady Arktos herself, who pointedly remarked that the king was promised to her, Odra could only stare dumbly, stunned by what she'd heard. Later, when she returned home, she burst into tears, disconsolately cycling between rage and grief.

Lindronnigen reminded her daughter that their mission was to eliminate the Elder Race and any potential threats from their Protectors in preparation for the coming of the Night Queen. "Thargorograht *is* a patient creature, but one does *not* test her patience and long live. You are greater than these Monitors who pretend to be kings and queens. If you can convince him to marry you, all well and good; we will take the Northern Kingdom and with it all the others. But know that you do not *need* to marry a king, for you are *already* a princess and will one day rule. Once Mother comes to take over, you can take any husband and world of your choosing."

"I do not want *any* husband or world. I want *Boreacubra* and *this* world! And I will have them! For years you've been saying grandmother will 'send the signal any day now'! I am through postponing my life! I will not become an old maid waiting on some ancient crone who has probably forgotten about us by now… *or is dead!*"

The invisible psychic assault that she received knocked her halfway across the room. "Never *ever* speak of the Night Queen in such a manner," Lindronnigen warned, a look of dread upon her face, "unless you to want to die a terrible death! Her ears hear things beyond what you know, child! And her spies are everywhere!"

With a look of mixed concern and hurt, Odra picked herself up and returned to court. She tried numerous spells and means to convince the king to marry her. When those all failed in turn, she grew despondent. Then, as if by providence, she happened upon Lady Arktos at the southwest corner tower where she'd gone to privately celebrate the news she'd received. On seeing Odra, she gloated: "King Boreacubra has just asked for my hand in marriage!" Odra stood stonily still. The future queen continued talking, but she barely heard the words coming out of her mouth.

"I can take any husband of my choosing," Odra whispered to herself half in a daze. A sudden scream stirred her. She looked about. Lady Arktos was nowhere to be seen. By instinct, she peered over the battlements. There, her body lay broken on the ground.

Upon learning of this "accident," Stagorr felt conflicted and upset. Lindronnigen was furious at Odra for risking exposing them before it was time. Odra herself felt sick and numb, though she convinced herself that it *had* to happen to remove the obstacle to her happiness, and took comfort in the synchronicity that had acted on her behalf. After an acceptable period of grieving, the court returned to normal life, and Odra resumed her pursuit of King Boreacubra—only to be thwarted again when he announced his engagement to Lady Polarca, the younger sister of Lady Arktos!

Unbeknownst to Odra, the law stated that in the event that the eldest of the Ikil noblewomen perished, the king must marry the next in line.

She confronted him in private. He was truly sorry for the law, but he made it clear that nothing would change his mind or cause him to break it. At that, Odra's heart turned even colder than the Snow King's. She had killed Lady Arktos for no reason. At the same time, she felt that if she could not have him, *none* would, and she began obsessing over the deaths of all the Ikil noblewomen who stood in her way.

Overtaken by utter despair, Odra grew sick again, and none of the Rock Wizard's charms would aid in restoring her.

"I know she is spoiled and petulant," Lindronnigen said to her husband, "but she is our daughter. Is there *nothing* we can do?"

Stagorr was not pleased, but he loved his daughter fiercely and would deny her and his wife nothing. He too had hoped that when the Night Queen came, she would spare the Snow Court. But the moment Lindronnigen accepted his hand in marriage, he'd accepted the fact that the king and many more besides would likely have to die. "He will not change the law, for it was handed down from above. But unless he consents to marry Odra, I fear she will wither away and die, and *this* I will *not* allow! I go now to take matters into my own hands. Boreacubra *will* consent to marry her!"

STAGORR AND THE ICE DEMONS

The members of King Boreacubra's Wynken Army were an inquisitive and tight-knit group whom the Ikil sentinels good-humoredly referred to as Iceheads. Stagorr had once been friendly with them, but after embarking on his plot to see his daughter married, he'd grown distant and soured in mood, often snapping at them as he angrily strode by. He no longer had patience for the lesser creatures of Tana as he busied himself with the formation of a cadre of Ikil sentinels loyal to him; this he accomplished by utilizing his wife's skills of persuasion, fostering discontent and desire in those who already admired and looked up to him. An added element of magic—some of which he had by this time effectively mastered—solidified their devotion.

But it wouldn't be enough to do what needed doing. So, putting aside his misgivings and distaste, he entered the northernmost part of the Endor forest known as Nevet's Woods and summoned the presence that was said to haunt the region. The silly Ewoks called it the Kroolok, but Stagorr knew the truth and shuddered.

He waited a long time in the dark for a sign, but none came. As he got up to depart the unholy circle that he'd fashioned from blood and stone, regretting the whole affair, he turned to see before him a giant, grotesque mockery of an owl, much taller than he. Any thought of escape was lost as the being's killing gaze bore into him.

"It is death to summon the Wind Walker in vain," the entity communicated to him, "for he who walks the cold white silence demands a steeper price in blood than this paltry offering. Present a sacrifice worthy of the ever-hungering Windagon and perhaps he will consider your wish."

In awe and terror, Stagorr agreed to do as instructed.

The Wynken had begun to wonder at Stagorr's changed mien and gossiped about it to the Lamicae Army of Automn the Leaf Queen, who had come to court for the passing of the Season Scepter that came with turn of each season. When the gossip reached his ears, Stagorr grew so enraged, he stalked and killed a troop of seven Wynken patrolling the outer border of the king's land. After this terrible deed, which shocked even him, he brought their sad broken bodies to the same location as before when first he summoned the Windagon and repeated the runes and mantras:

"The *strong* cannot be controlled in this way," the emaciated demigod stated, "but as to your *admirers*, they who have turned a blind eye to your misdeeds…"

Thereafter, the Ikil he'd been grooming were physically and mentally transformed. This was no painless alteration, but as he stood before them, willing their submission, the consented. "Hail, my *Wechuge*, you have chosen strength and cunning!" But to everyone else, they were but vicious enemies known only as Ice Demons.

It wasn't long after Automn and her forces returned to their own realm that Stagorr and his Ice Demons made their move. The plan was simple: Bind the Snow King and kill any Ikil yet loyal to him. Boreacubra would be given the choice to consent to marry Odra or watch as members of court were killed, one by one, until he did. As spoils to the Wechuge, they would be free to take whomever they wished. No longer would they wait upon spoiled royals while enduring rejection and endless ceremony to vie for their hands. The Ice Demons would be as masters of their domain under Queen Odra! And then they would sate their lust for war in the other realms.

In the stillest part of the night when everyone should have been asleep, Stagorr led the Wechuge to the attack. But they were surprised to find a full battalion of Ikil and Wynken armies on guard. "The blasted Leaf Queen must have warned them!" Stagorr whispered. "No matter. They will prove no match for the Wechuge!" With a thrumming battle cry, they rushed forward to the slaughter. The Ikil and Wynken soldiers were shocked by the fearsome appearance of their former comrades, and it cost lives.

That was when the Snow King emerged with the Season Scepter in hand!

"Never have I regarded my servants as beneath notice," the king said sadly. Never had Stagorr seen him look so dejected. He then felt a sharp pang of regret and shame. "I heard the gossip of the Wynken and discussed it with my sister, Automn, whom you know as the Leaf Queen. She postulated that your long absences and altered behavior might perhaps be a result of the Queen of the Night Spirit's allurements. Alas, she did not trust Odra either, but there we had a sharp disagreement, for I defended your daughter—yes, I know now who she is. I do love her, or, at least I did until I found what she'd done. Still, I could never have married her. Though I am king, I am not the above the law. And the laws exist to maintain the balance. Automn insisted that I would need the Season Scepter. I scoffed, but she left it with me rather than take it, as is the custom for the passing of the seasons. She said she'd constructed her own wand and advised each of us to do the same, though we've been lax in following suit. After tonight, I see we must. I loved you like a son, Stagorr, and even now I would welcome you back, but what you have come to do you must do."

It was too late for Stagorr to have a change of heart. He knew that and the king knew that. And though it pained him to do it, he charged with the intent to kill the one he'd been made to protect. But King Boreacubra's aim proved truer. The Season Scepter blasted out a beam that froze Stagorr in his tracks. A few more shots saw all of the Ice Demons, yet embattled against his protectors, encased in blocks of ice.

The shaken Snow King took a deep, cold breath. Deeply grieved by this turn of events, he tasked the Wynken to store the frozen conspirators in an underground ice cavern where he would not be forced to look upon them every day.

In the days following her father's plot to supplant the Snow King failed, Odra pled ignorance of any wrongdoing, claiming that he'd only wanted what was best for her. His silence spoke to his disbelief and disappointment. The anger that met it was filled of Odra's frustration and blame for leading her on, and she wept for her sorry state.

For his part, King Boreacubra knew she was right, and the weight of guilt fell upon him. Desperately had he wished the law had been otherwise. But it wasn't, and look how many had paid the price for his lack of austerity in attendance to the law?

Despite the objections of Automn, he did not have the heart to punish Odra. The loss of her father was punishment enough. Still, he knew better than to keep the potentially dangerous Duchess around, and so the Snow King ordered the construction of her own rich domain where she would go live, allowing her to hold onto her title, privileges, and attendants.

As to Lindronnigen, she would ever after blame Odra for the loss of Stagorr, accusing her of manipulating him into prematurely moving against the Monitors. Thus, the two became estranged. Odra never gave up on her plots to seduce King Boreacubra, determined to become this world's one and only Snow Queen.

THE FIRST BATTLE OF ENDOR

Soberly, the Flower Queen considered the betrayal of Stagorr and the evident display of magic abilities he hadn't previously possessed and sent her emissaries to search the places he might have roamed. And there, within the dense boughs of Linden's Great Eastern Forest, they at last discovered the Vassal Queen's keep.

The four Monitors geared for war: Queen Automn, the Leaf Queen; King Boreacubra, the Snow King; Queen Maeve, the Flower Queen; and King Usil, the Sun King. Along with them, their guards and soldiers, many of the local Protectors marched through the Forest of Thorns. But the mystic runes of the Vassal Queen cast for this very purposes now warned her of their coming, and she bellowed malisons that raised up great stone walls amidst the trees, converting her comfortable domicile into a fortress. She also summoned the Stone Beast and those forces that had long awaited her call: Raiches, Kradaks, Yootak, Octucor, and the terrifying Megissigem, the Griagh whose lair lay in the marshes along with the bones of its many victims.

Without Stagorr and the life they'd built for themselves, there was no point to maintaining 'Lindronnigen.' Allowing herself one brief moment to grieve the loss of her husband and the life they'd had, she wondered if perhaps she'd allowed herself to be seduced into a false sense of security. Her Mother would say so. Letting go with a breath, she transformed her upper half to that of a Wroonian witch she'd once bested while shifting her torso into that of a deadly night-creature of too many legs.

Taking back her ancient name, Moragarom now watched as the Protectors of Tana stormed her castle. Her creatures beset the army from the haunted forest that surrounded them. Many fell on that accursed day, and a number of Bobogs, Quorks, and Jotnar were turned to stone by the Stone Monster. But they had taken many of the enemy with them too. The Monitors, who'd also shed their friendly guises, erupted in their true forms as Sentinel Spirits and put an end to the Stone Beast.

Now penetrating the magical barrier around her central chamber, Queen Automn announced: "Depart this world and never return or suffer the fate of the vile!"

Had things gone otherwise, Moragarom would have done just that, bargaining with the Snow King for Stagorr and leaving for another world where she might rule a less hostile population who would appreciate her greatness. But it was as if her Mother knew her treacherous thoughts, for just then, the reinforcements arrived.

Still she might have fled but for the events that followed. Commanded by the Night Queen, a Cloud Demon burst open a tunnel to Lesser Tana into which the King of the Night Spirit hurtled. Fearsome and potent with eventide magic, he entered the Forest of Thorns. Though the Filar-Nitzan flew off to do whatever it is that Cloud Demons do, the King of the Night Spirit beckoned another…

Thargorograht had years earlier made a bargain with one of those menacing Dark Ones that her siblings knew naught of. Destroying the star-stone seal of the Celestials, she'd released the Windagon from Abyssissa, the frozen planet of the star Ea, where he'd been imprisoned. At that time, he came to Lesser Tana to stalk the

northern forests and mountains. The King of the Night Spirit now called this entity from his blighted copse to the chamber where he now towered over the rest.

The Monitors had heard rumors of such a thing haunting the Woods of Nevet and its surrounding areas, but now that it stood before them, it was like nothing they could have imagined, a withered giant with the eyes of an owl-thing and the antlers of a great elk. Beside him rose the royally cloaked and cowled King of the Night Spirit, eyes blazing with scornful disdain. These were things of terror personified, and for the first time, they felt the overwhelming malignancy of the Enemy as the anxiety of impending death hovered over them. But it was not for themselves that they feared, but for those they'd been charged to protect. "Who are you who dare tread upon our world?" demanded the Sun King.

"I am the King of the Night Spirit," replied the cruel and crackling voice, his orbs burned savagely, "servant of the true Sovereign of this Realm, she who is above all, the Queen of the Night Spirit. If now you bow before her Daughter, the appointed regent, you yet may live, for she is merciful to her minions but pitiless to her opponents."

"And who are you, foul spirit?" asked the Flower Queen to the gaunt giant.

With the stench of death and a voice of unsettling exhalation, it said, "I am the Walker on the Winds… the White Silence… Windagon, Lord of the Demons… First god of the Wyndigal and Death to the old order!"

"And I presume *you* are the Vassal Queen of the Night Spirit," stated the Snow King, "the corrupter of my chamberlain… Odra's mother."

"Restore Stagorr to me," Moragarom reasoned, heedless of the consequences, "and I will see to it that you are spared when my Mother comes to claim this realm, for it was gifted her by those Necromantic Powers whom none can deny…"

"I deny them!" announced the Sun King who lit up as he said it. "And I think the Celestials have done a good job of denying them as well! Your mad gods had no authority to grant this world nor any except those of the circles of Hell! Leave us in peace, and you may take Stagorr and the Ice Demons with you…"

"The Night Queen has commanded the abdication or eradication of your kind!" the King of the Night Spirits declared, but the reminder was pointed at Moragarom.

Why had I waited? she reproached herself. *Had I approached the Monitors when first he was imprisoned, Stagorr and I would now be away. Even if I could overcome the King of the Night Spirit, it would only postpone Stagorr's torture and death, for no one defied the Night Queen and lived to tell of it.* Moragarom did not betray her feelings in any way. "You must accede… or accept death. No other options remain."

Now that they'd each established their positions, the Season Deities would no longer waste time bandying words. Here was evil embodied. For this purpose had they been created; for this conflict had they been brought forth. The King of the Night Spirit smiled wickedly. To ensure that they weren't interrupted, he cast a *barrus* spell around their immediate arena.

The carnage that ensued was so terrible that it was afterwards named in legend as the First Battle of Tana or, as it would later be coined, the First Battle of Endor.

As the fighting grew more heated, knocking down fortress walls, Moragarom replaced them with a more potent magical barrier. Queen Maeve focused, and with her bough, managed to furtively rip a tear in it, creating an opening that allowed the Gorphs to hold it ajar while the Protectors took turns entering the sphere.

The Protectors seemed harmless at first, laughable even, but their hearts were fierce and their weapons were embued with powerful enchantments so that the damage they inflicted surprised the invaders. From his rubicund eyes the King of the Night Spirit shot forth annihilating rays, and not a few fell beneath that dreadful gaze. While King Boreacubra countered it with ice magic and the Sun King unleashed fire upon the Windagon, the Flower Queen lifted her bough to blast the King of the Night Spirit with a powerful and unexpected surge of stored light energy.

With Moragarom's attention on crushing the now teeming Protectors, Queen Automn directed her wand to awaken the quickened trees that had been raised up to support the enlarged walls. Boughs broke through behind the Vassal Queen who had raised her staff upon which the Shadowstone had been placed to fire away at the wave of surging furred bodies, grimacing as they burst into charred atoms. When their numbers thinned out, she turned her attention to the Monitors, who were beginning to wane under the merciless attacks of her lethal allies.

But she had not counted on two things. The trees obeyed the Leaf Queen and held firm Moragarom's arm. At the same time, a brave Ewok named Tamil Skwint scurried up one of the pine's boughs, having surmised—after seeing its discharge eradicate several of his friends—that her staff was the primary source of her power. With fierce resolve, the Ewok warrior snatched the Shadowstone from the talons of her staff and tossed it over to Queen Automn just before he began to lose his balance. It was then that Moragarom's claws reached him and nearly squeezed him to death before she flung him across the chamber.

The Leaf Queen squeezed the powerful stone as she joined her mind with the maddened Crystal Rider inside it. The contest of wills seemed to last a lifetime, but it was only a few seconds before Kedavra was forced to capitulate, having been reforged to obey the one who wielded her. Queen Automn raised the Shadowstone and sent out a beam of light that exploded through the ceiling, opening a black hole in the skies above the Stone Table through which the King of the Night Spirit was hurled back to his domain. Reinvigorated, the Monitors focused their attacks on the Windagon. Although the King of the Wind Demons could not be destroyed, he could be incapacitated as they discovered when they cast the invultuation of *daboolhat thuk* upon him, rendering him into a lifeless statue.

Aghast at the loss of her allies and the Shadowstone, Moragarom faltered. Wasting no time, the Leaf Queen, Flower Queen, and Sun King ensorcelled her in a circle of strong branches, buffeting winds, energy currents, and roaring flames, allowing King Boreacubra to use the Season Scepter to freeze her with a Tanaic version of *somnifer gelum* just as he had done to her consort before her. With that, all was still again. The Protectors had won.

"All hail, Tamil Skwint!" the Sun King began to chant; the others followed suit.

"All hail, Protectors of Tana!" the wounded Tamil started in response. "Yub nub!"

Skwint would heal, but many would never return from the battle: Duloks, Yuzzum, Gharial, Gorphs, Dagan, Quorks, and Ewoks all had fought bravely and died. In memorial to them and in honor of their sacrifice, Skwint proposed that the seven races bind themselves to the defense of one another. It was known as the Spell of Seven Oaths, and to it they held fast, agreeing that whosoever should violate the pact would be cursed.

With the Shadowstone now in the possession of the Indur Ruling Council, they endeavored to learn its secrets. When sightings of the Cloud Demon reached their ears, they cast *ipatawag hoosha*. The Hoosha was yet cruising through the curious skies of Lesser Tana when the Indur spell summoned him before them. In exchange for his freedom, he revealed the secret of the Stone of Shadow.

Utilizing their healing properties, they awoke an aspect of Kedavra's original nature. But something fundamental in the aspect of the Crystal Rider had been altered while under the power of the Night Queen that ensured that she would always be her loyal servant. Nonetheless, from her they confirmed their fears that Thargorograht would one day come to exact vengeance and claim the world as her own!

The Indur Ruling accepted this, knowing that the hour had come to enact the final part of the plan that would protect their world. The Shadowstone would become home to their spirits. In so doing this, it was hoped that their presence might further heal Kedavra's shattered psyche, for they knew now after so many years that the Crystal Riders held the minds of ancient Celestials from a far-distant realm. And they knew that the hearts of those minds were wholesome if not entirely whole. They just needed a bit of assistance. The Sun King would enable this process. Upon the Stone of Shadow the spirits of the Indur Ruling Council were transferred, and half of the jewel at that moment shone as bright as Ibleam before the other Monitors aided the transition, allowing it to settle to a cool yellow.

Henceforth, the jewel became known as the Sunstar-Shadowstone.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

STRATAGEMS OF THE SPIDER

SECTION I: DARK NESTS & BLACK HIVES

Soros was the key to everything. After so many failures, the perfect candidate had come to her very doorstep. *If there was a will to the universe, it must surely be that of the enigmatic Darkness, for who else could have arranged this, preserving him alive through phantasmagoric ordeals that only a few had ever survived?* At the Night Queen's direction, he'd gone forth to Lesser Tana and then traveled to Alsakan, where he did not have long to wait for his target to arrive.

Awake and alert to the return of an old enemy, the Killiks felt the stirrings of danger and sent forward a contingent to discover what stranger had arrived at their door.

They were not unduly concerned. One of the reasons no opponent had ever overcome their forces was due to their unique gift of hive-mind, which subsumed any and all who dared enter into their presence to attempt to bring harm. With this gift, the Killiks had easily repelled antagonists by simply bringing them into their collective consciousness and *joining* them, as they called it. Once they'd subdued their aggressors' wills, they turned their foes against one another; in cases where the Killiks opted to show mercy, they sent them back to whatever planet they'd crawled up from, releasing them from their control. Many were the battles, races, and worlds saved by the mere arrival of Killik forces.

Thargorograht *hated* them more than any other Elder Race in the galaxy.

Incalculable were the battlefield operations they'd spoiled. Countless were the tactics they'd ruined. Immeasurable was the time wasted on having to redeploy forces. Worse than all of these combined was the fact that they were an insectoid species that should have been serving *her*!

Thus, she *desired* them more than any other Elder Race in the galaxy.

She had, of course, brought their offspring race, the Molator, into her graces. And one Killik hive had come to serve her. She'd managed that, at least. But they remained a negligible minority unable to even go near the Killik nests without becoming subsumed by their far greater hive-mind. And though she loved her Dark Nest, they served as both a reminder of her failure and a taste of what might be if she had the greater whole. So she'd made it a goal to have them *all* in her mesmeric embrace.

Long were the years she'd spent developing spells that could accomplish this task. Her siblings would have called it a foolish obsession. There were, after all, plenty of insectoid races in the galaxy, including other Elder Races whom she had not yet converted as well as ones such as the Buro of Kaisa, whom she found so intensely beautiful she'd have woven a grand and vernal forest of evergreen Káteros Trees for them, protecting them behind a skein of her densest webs and fiercest Yam'rii Senti-

nels. On the other hand, she found the Maio absurd-looking but deeply intelligent, so committed to their tasks that if they came upon a problem, they would not cease to work until they solved it. Notwithstanding all these and more, she yet held an abiding and unyielding fascination for the Killiks, this most perfect of races!

JOINING THE KILLIKS

The Queen of the Great Black Nest felt the life-force of Moragarom become still. The Indur were surely no match for her Daughter and mighty servitors, but perhaps something unexpected had occurred. She would investigate, but now she was about achieve what she'd long desired.

Lord Soros watched patiently as the Killik forces drew near. Upon seeing the abomination that he was, they went lock-step into the process of *joining* him.

And that was when something *unexpected* happened.

They tried to understand it, to course-correct for it, but nothing worked. Something had gone terribly wrong—something that had never before occurred, and they were helpless before it. Instead of subsuming *his* mind, he subsumed *theirs!*

Soros had poisoned the well of the Killiks' collective consciousness, turning their own power against them. Now *joined* to him, they became the Black Hive of Soros and servants of the Night Queen!

It would not take long to enslave the entire planet, from which they would move on to their sister world. And on the petrified mounds of the Castle Lands of Oroboro, the Killiks felt the change in the air, a stormfront that carried the rancid taint of evil and death… They braced for impact as the emerging swarm blotted out the sky.

Many were dragged down, unable to resist the pull of their own current. Some were more successful. A few were immune. Those able to resist the undertow flew off to sound the alarm, to regroup, to mourn, and to figure out a new course of action.

How can we attack our own when they had not willingly joined *the influence of the Night Herald? But if we fail, this malevolent Joiner King will rule the Killiks and move unstoppably through the galaxy!*

The warnings of the Killiks added to that of the Indur's and others to set into motion a chain of events. For the Elder Races, news of the turning of the Killiks by the servant of Thargorograht was grave and calamitous beyond measure. The horrors of the prior wars were still remembered by them, and many were determined to flee, as some of their ancient brethren had done, rather than be induced to engage once more in the carnage and cruel vagaries of war. Yet, while some maintained a policy of isolation or defense, a larger number went to meet their adversaries head-on, surprising them with the vast technological constructs that were the Engines of Defense.

And wherever war came, so too did the Fell Worms of El'Shuddem emerge to devour the living and dying on all sides, feeding off the negative energies of suffering and strife… and so did the Whills cry out in anguish.

THE STORY OF HATHKHALID SUD

The Hunters of the Night Spirit that had been sent to find a Precursor race to heal Urthha had taken advantage of the chaos created by their beloved queen. After several failed attempts to procure their prize, they came to their erstwhile allies on Kar'a'katok. After learning from Hathkhalid Sud, current leader of the Shimholt, that neither he nor his people served the gods of Illathurion any longer, their rejoinder was swift and cruel. They abducted his children and consort, Psamtiken Re.

Laughing at Sud's anguish, they made it clear that his family's return and the salvation of all Kar'a'katok was predicated on his capture of those who could achieve their ends. The captives he would procure were to be led to a specified location by means of a portal that the Night Queen had opened for this very purpose.

Hathkhalid Sud had no time to deliberate. He knew of one Elder Race whose gift of restoration had been employed many times during the previous wars—one who had recently made known to him their intent to depart their homeworld—the Osserians.

For the work Thargorograht required and at the speed with which she required it, many would be needed. Though it grieved him terribly, Hathkhalid Sud had to betray the innocent to save the innocent, justifying his actions in the knowledge that the Osserians would, at the very least, not be killed.

In the end, he completed the grim deed and departed Otherspace, leaving the Osserians behind in the bowels of Urthha to begin their work of restoration. He returned home with the bodies of his wife and children. Only one child had been spared, and in this it was said he'd been shown a great mercy.

SIGNALS

The failure to have a claim on Lesser Tana was a blow, but her triumphs outweighed her losses. The Black Hive of Soros had greatly inflated the number of Killik *Joiners*. The Warlocks of Muzara controlled additional hives. The Dark Nest had summoned numerous allies to the cause, and the Hunters of the Night Spirit had found a race to heal Urthha, which would soon afford her the ultimate weapon.

The time had come at last! Gnashing her mandibles and scraping her many claws, Thargorograht sent out the signal that marked the start of the Twilight Wars.

The Night Queen reveled in the moment. She'd proven wise in ways her siblings had not and had known to change tactics when required. Whereas in the prior wars, she had sent specific forces to specific worlds while working to undermine and erode the authority of the Firstborn, who'd been their greatest threat; now that was not the case, but neither did she have so great a force. Now, the price of disobedience impelled former allies who'd grown too arrogant, while fear of the returning Old Ones had driven potential new allies, enemies, and neutral parties to more readily submit.

The Black Hives served as the first massive wave, pouring forth from the Core like a scourge of locusts, infesting planets across the galaxy, and subsuming sapients by the scores. The contagion of the Soros hive-mind had not infected all, however, and she

knew the immune were calling out to other Elder Races and offspring within distance who might also be immune. Tracking the whereabouts of the Black Hive of Soros, Ruur, Kitinitik, Talonolat, and Ukunuku to the worlds of Alsakan, Alderaan, Corellia, and others, the Killiks rallied in opposition to the dreaded Joiner King, surging in battle formations to stamp out the source—Lord Soros and the Warlocks of Muzara. And their primary target was the heart of Sith power on Korriban itself!

The hordes of Soros were a terrible and overwhelming force that included trained Massassi warroirs, K'lor'slugs, and the Night Herald's newly reanimated Ssither. Together, they outnumbered the Killiks, but they hadn't counted on an even more powerful foe. *The Ones*.

The Ones would not allow the galaxy to become *joined* to the hive-mind of the Night Herald or his Night Queen, and they came to the Killiks' aid, calling forth Defenders to smash the Sith on Talon and other besieged worlds.

This broke the hold of Soros and the Warlocks of Muzara and freed the *joined* Killiks in most of the Black Hives while Lord Soros and the surviving Warlocks sheltered on Sarafur, preparing their next strike, for their malign influence remained an ever-present threat.[180]

The Killiks who'd been exposed found that they no longer had control over their hive-mind abilities, which now subsumed any and all who drew too near to them. This was true for the renewed Thuruht hive, who for the good of the galaxy were forced into isolation from their ancestral homes on Alsakan and Alderaan into the Unknown Regions, colonizing the abandoned world of Xaxax (now Yoggoy) and others. To this day they remain in their own pocket of space away from other races, abiding in their vigilance against the reemergence of corrupted nests and hives. Among few consolations was the friendship of the insectoid Igzians who'd also sought solitude nearby.[181]

Thargorograht was furious! The race she'd fought to conquer for so long had just slipped through her fingers… She sent the Gorog Nest to secretly follow the Killiks into deep space to await the day they would reclaim the Colony Worlds for their Unseen Queen. Then, thinking amply on the confidence she'd placed in her champion and whether she should maintain it, she called out to the yet again defeated Lord Soros on Sarufur to redeem himself and join the Wizards of the Night Spirit currently en route to Lesser Tana to bring aid to her Daughter who had gone silent.

Should Moragarom have fallen victim to foul play, Thargorograht would personally oversee the torture of each and every one responsible!

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[180] Sarafur is also known as Kuna's Tail III. One Killik faction who had formerly served the Lord of Alsakan petitioned for peace. Later they would seek and find atonement in fine weaving and shaping to become the new Nest of Saras.

[181] Though the Killik crisis had ended, a faction of the Black Hive of Soros hid on Alderaan when the Ones arrived and so had gone unnoticed in the melee. Also, a segment of the Ukunuku hive went on to become Unu, which eventually became the Dark Nest under Raynar Thul.

SECTION II: ALL THE WORLDS WILL BE YOUR ENEMY

The Twilight Wars would be the last of the aetheric wars fought between the maleficent agents of Illathurion and the great Defenders of Skyriver who arose in opposition to them. It differed from the earlier conflicts in that it was not limited to opposing sides. Cruel races fought one another for supremacy. Where one fell, another rose to take its place. Principalities that had grown powerful on their respective worlds now reared up in aggregation with the spawn of the Old Ones, the acolytes of the Eldritch Ones, and all the cravers of dominion, ultraists, and seekers after death.

It also proved to be the lengthiest of the Cosmic Wars, dragging on for ten thousand years as client races of the Enemy fought on long after their masters were gone.

To quickly coordinate a defense for vulnerable races, new alliances were forged by worlds that had capable warriors or advanced technology, and even those not as proficient in these areas showed a desire to provide aid. This is but a sampling:

AKIR

Alliances sometimes made for strange bedfellows. The world of Akir had help in the form of a Vahl-Kirian Warrior from Tirahn, a cloned Nestor, a smuggler from Terra II, a wanted assassin from Nascosto, and the sole remaining Lazuli. Their job was no simple one: to protect Akir from the Eli mutants of the Malmori Empire. This would have been difficult enough, but the wicked Malmourri people yet wielded the Stellar Converter that had been sold to them by the now extinct K'kybak, by which means they had already destroyed the proud Umateal peoples.

The Malmourri were amongst the last vestiges of the once arrogant Elium race of ascended Alterrans. Of the many colonies they'd settled in the dwarf galaxy of Pûrgrothiá, the Malmourri and others had broken off from Elium control, deciding that since they were superior Humans, they would form their own consortium to rule the unwashed masses. Whether at the hands of providence or the dedication and skill of Akir's protectors, the Malmori Empire and its superweapon were defeated.

But history has an unusual habit of repeating itself, and the power vacuum left by the Malmori Empire came to be filled by the Imperium. And what they lacked in their predecessor's pedigree was more than made up for in base cruelty and technological advancement, expanding out from the conquered Mother World for an era of oppression, exploitation, and stagnation. This time it fell to the inhabitants of the moon of Veldt to unite an unlikely band of allies and restore freedom to Purgrothia.

ALASHAN

The Alashanians had long been troubled by their violent past, but that did not stop them from rebuilding, for they were yet technological wizards, and their world came to feature a sprawling network of remarkable cities. These were not as wondrous as their cities of old, for those were works of interwoven skill and intricate enchantment. But the few who saw their new world thought it impressive. Though they welcomed their estranged siblings, only a relative few of the Elder Races would

deign to enjoy their hospitality, as the actions of Alashan were yet held in dishonor. It was on one such visit that word came to them that the Old Ones were returning.

Considering the matter at some length after an examination of the trajectory followed by races such as the Demmeonites, Pirians, El'gusclar-fal'Mörtilspí, and more, the Alashanians now made the decision to move beyond the reach of all others.

Down to the most minute detail, Alashan and its largest capital, the City of Forever, was replicated within a vast network of supercomputers which would theoretically enable its citizens to continue their lives as before, albeit in a digital facsimile. In order to ensure the protection of the Central City which held the mainframe that would store the billions of lines of uploaded code for each individual, they called forth Amon Lith, their "bio-engineered" Guardian.

That fearsome and deadly sentinel rivaled any of the entities of Illathurion, for the Guardian of Forever could teleport, alter his size, enter Central City's great computers, and tap into the geothermal heart of Alashan, which lay deep under the extensive mountain ranges that surrounded the city, in order to release massively destructive blasts as potent as that of the later Death Stars, ensuring that the very airspace around Alashan was impenetrable.

Few besides the Alashanians knew that Amon Lith was no mere construct but the very father of the Elementals in Skyriver. He had chosen to dwell on Alashan and was there when the destructive blast of Notron came. It was said to have driven him mad, for in its wake, he'd allowed himself to be augmented by the yet formidable Alashanians so as to become a being immeasurable in cunning and power.

In the event that any did manage to get past the Guardian, control rooms were designed with an overlapping matrix that ranged beneath all the cities of Alashan, ensuring that even if multiple stations failed, it wouldn't affect the overall system, which would be repaired by other bio-engineered entities designed for that purpose. So long as the planet itself was not destroyed, the Alashanians would live out their days in peace. Their sole regret was that they would never again see their siblings and offspring in the worlds outside… Once the mind of each Alashanian was meticulously scanned, each *connectome*—the map or wiring diagram of every neuronal connection in the brain—was transferred into a computer with editing software that filtered out destructive emotions from the code, forestalling major conflicts in the simulation. Upon completion, it was uploaded into the massive mainframe that would house it alongside the virtual world. After some small adjustments, all seemed well for the Alashanian avatars, who were soon living lives more exciting than before. For a small percent, however, things didn't quite click and they died or became overcome with madness; this was known as *suicebernetics* and was not an uncommon side-effect of the process for a few. The mad ones were called the Aythrin and exiled.

It occurred to the virtual inhabitants that it would be no great task to join their thoughts and experiences directly, and within a short time of that first successful test, the concept of separate identities began to fade, as did the need for simulated bodies, which were abandoned for the collective joy of the whole. A new phase came about as they discarded individuality and merged into a single Alashanian collective.

But not every one of the Alashanian minds desired this. Yet as they were a tiny minority, they were ignored. This led to small pockets of resistance. And when they

joined together, the annoyed masses began to think of them as a kind of virus, a corrupted code that might gradually taint the whole. *For the good of the collective*, it was deemed that these trouble-spots had to be *humanely* euthanized. But in so attempting this, a kind of cognitive dissonance arose in the Alashanian collective, and with its mind stretched and stressed, it too eventually went mad. As war spread across their simulated landscapes, monsters emerged out of resistance fighters, the Alashanian god became a devil, and their virtual heaven soured into a virtual hell.

ANKH

Few know of the hidden Elementals, or how even they, trapped in the crucible, could not escape the effects of war. In the ramping up of the Twilight Wars, it was as if the galaxy curdled in response… and some were affected more than others.

An ancient civilization, the Ankh had served the Old Ones in the Empyrean Wars. They came to dwell at the edge of the galaxy on a world of the same name. Centuries of competing dynasties and civil wars saw the Ankh grow physically and mentally scarred by the radiation of their star, which had been damaged by another competing fanatical and wicked servitor race. The call to arms by the Night Queen was the catalyst for the Ankh's ruling Triarch to unite their peoples, not *for* the Old Ones but *against* them, declaring war on those they blamed for all their troubles!

It did not go well for them, and their civilization was ravaged. Had it not been for their scientists, who succeeded in an area few before them had, they'd have perished. Now, in direst need, they called up the Elementals to fight on their behalf.

Pyrdrakons or Sun Dragons were by nature the most frenetic of the Elementals. Add to this the fact that this particular Sun Dragon had also been maddened by the catastrophic damage done to Ankh's star, and one might understand why, once freed, it flew to feed on the nearby suns before summoning the Firedrakes from within Ankh to join it. When the sated Fire Elementals turned to see who these scientists on Ankh were and if they might be good to eat as well, the Triarch offered them something even tastier than themselves, something they'd never before known—power over all!

Within organo-metallic armor that could be shaped and reshaped at will, the Fire Elementals agreed to lead the Ankh against their ancient masters. In preparation, the creatures reshaped themselves into figures that mimicked the ancient gods. For this reason, they later came to be worshipped as Star Gods. But whether from madness or hubris, the ardent Fire Elementals turned as cruel as their opponents.

Perhaps they thought it wise or perhaps it was a cruel hoax, but the Star Gods challenged Zarekh, King of the Ankh, to don the same armor: "If it's the Old Ones you truly wish to defeat, far thicker skins that what you presently wear will you need!"

The Triarch debated. Finally, Phaeron Rawkeyling, declared, "After all, why should we not? If we do this, we will have the immortality we have long desired and known ourselves entitled to!" And as they stepped boldly into the bio-furnaces to have their minds transferred into living metal bodies, their flesh melted away.

The Star Gods, forgetting they'd once been benevolent Starbirds, lapped up their life-forces. When they saw that only the spark of life itself remained, they said, "Let

us give them some of our essence." What emerged in those robotic bodies was something governed by the insanity of tyranny that sought to purify through fire.

The Star Gods and armies of Ankh terrified the myriads of inhabitants of Illathurion and drew the attention of the Night Queen's myriad servitors and other ghastly Old Ones, who respected the threat and went to war against them. And under the rule of King Cavanees, even the Sephi joined their cause, knowing what horrors would befall the galaxy if maddened Fire Elementals acting as dark gods held sway!

The Triarch's victory was at hand when they decided the time had come to get out from under the yoke of the Star Gods. Based on the workings of the ancient angle-snares, their scientists had fashioned in secret shards, inside of each was a tiny pocket dimension. And into each the Fire Elementals were lured and trapped!

In a rare moment of farsight, before the Sephi and other Elder Races could then turn on them, as the Ankh knew they intended, the Triarch ordered their people to hibernate in deep, underground catacombs upon numerous tomb worlds, many of which remain unknown, save for a few such as Ankhela (later Iktoch), Ankhural, and Necr'ygor, places from which they would later emerge after they'd been long-forgotten. Calling themselves the Necryn, they dreamt of going forth to take the stars.

ANURA

The toad-like Chanchu of Anura were a seemingly peaceful people ruled by a lazy, vain, and materialistic cabal who longed for glory days that never were. They'd developed a centralized, complex computer system to run the day-to-day aspects of their world which they were too lazy to do themselves and too controlling to delegate, but when even that failed, they did something they aught not to have, and summoned their father, who their race had long since abjured. And Ythogtha, having heard their grumbling supplications, rolled his cyclopean eye and sighed.

The Chanchu had never been an offspring race he was particularly fond of (he preferred his dutiful Yuggs), but he deigned to give their computer some of his sapience. From this, it developed a hostile, xenophobic spirit. It's first act was to banish its makers. It's second amused it more, as it involved the lobotomizing and mind-controlling of the citizenry while transforming the planet to a factory world in order to expand its new Toad Empire. Finally, when it shot a meteor against the planet Coomputu, pushing its orbit so far it became uninhabitable, that was a step too far.

Cosh the Lepi was *not* amused. He'd just defeated a terrorist group of Yinchorri, outwitted a mad Cornerian dictator, and formed the United Animal Federation with fellow persecuted races of Squibs, Cantrosians, Shistavanen, Chubbits, and more timid races, such as the fox-like Amaran of Amar; the raccoon-like Procyon of Laar; the duck-like Kanopis of Kanopis III; the caracara-like Tasari of Tasariq; and the two-armed variety of Ardennian. With Cosh in the lead, the UAF attacked the capital of Anura, destroyed the complex computer and broke the hold on its Chanchu thralls.[182]

[182] Intended to make a point about the inalienable rights of all living beings, the UAF's embrace of the term "Animal" was wilfully misconstrued as an admission of sub-sapience by those seeking to justify the hunting of its member races; a cruel irony given its intent to counter such depredations.

The Chanchu relocated to nearby Garnib where they were welcomed by its Balinaka natives. As the colder world caused their color shift from the green to blue spectrum, they changed their name to the Vernol, the "Winter People." A small faction foolishly salvaged the core of the A.I. in an attempt to rebuild the empire, only to fall through a wormhole to Hyperion where the intelligence betrayed them for a wily, newt-like race.

ARBRA

The Arbrans were regarded as a fractious people due to their actions in the dim past when they'd made a deal with Thargorograht to remove the Sith from their world in exchange for the Crystal Rider. They knew it had been cowardly to do so, and often they bewailed their fate and past choices, for they were not an evil people. But evil or not, their choices had come home to roost.

The Dark Nest paid them a visit to inform them that the Night Queen was calling upon them to fight. They dissimulated as best they could, but they knew in their hearts that they could not do this. Regrettably, neither would their pride allow them to seek aid from the Elder Races whom they'd turned away from so long ago.

Dourly they considered their options. The Thaumaturgist Circle had been devastated by the betrayal of their Agorhyffen offspring who became the Caste during the Empyrean Wars. *Another failure in a line of failures that came upon us after our fall.*

"We could relocate to one of the worlds of our offspring," offered Wruk Hynen, "though I fear that would only make things worse for them."

"We could find an uninhabited world and re-establish ourselves under a new name," suggested Karnis Thon, "but that would only buy us time, since no matter what alias we give ourselves, we are well-known to the Queen of the Night Spirit."

"Our refusal to fight for the Night Queen will make us a prime target," Jid Dreyam added. "Sooner or later, we will be found and destroyed."

"If only we could appeal to the Celestials or even one of our Firstborn siblings," Sodon Volentis lamented, "thenceforth, we'd be invited to the safety of *their* realm."

"We were *disloyal*," reminded Maïl Rantex. "Our corrupted nature remains an impediment to entering the Unseen Realm; nor would our siblings want us *soiling* their home!"

"But what if we could *extricate* our corruption?" asked Volentis. "Cleanse our souls? Mayhaps we would be welcomed back into the Celestials' embrace as had others."

Reasoning that by eradicating their inner evil, they could return to their original state, they failed to see the obvious. The mystical powers the Thaumaturgist Circle employed over the millennia to replace their diminished gifts were tainted by *The Key of Rehobostar*, which contained cabalistic knowledge designed aeons earlier with a façade of virtue in order to obscure the false and demonic lore that lay beneath it.

But having acquired the ancient tome during a centuries-long search for a means by which to restore their dwindling power, they did not know any of this when they began utilizing the geothermal properties of the hundred giant, crystal power-rods that grew in their planet's core. So they passed through uncanny rites, pleased at the results they were feeling, which suggested they had chosen the right path forward.

But within the Grotto of the Gorgodon, aglow with the spectral luminance of the clusters of aragonite crystals, they witnessed to their shock and horror the procreation of a spectral being of unwavering malevolence. They at first thought this incorporeal entity a Celestial. But when it spoke things borne of their perverse desires and iniquitous inclinations, they knew better and called it *the Darker*. It resembled them in form but taller and with a skeletal, rotting green pallor. In spite of the malevolence it gave off, the members of the Thaumaturgist Circle attempted to reason with it. Wruk Hynen, Ki Bolont, and Karnis Thon were disemboweled, beheaded, and dismembered for their efforts. The remaining members, covered in their blood and gore, fled as the creature followed, flaying alive whomever it caught.

They were not prepared for this. Rantex, Volentis, and Dreyam could not recall any way to stop it, save for one thing: there had been a method used in olden times to trap one of the roaming Shadow Beings that had come to their world. With the aid of *The Key of Rehobostar*, they erected an energy field that surrounded the ghastly wraith and kept it trapped inside the bedchamber it had recently entered.

It wouldn't keep him for long. In ancient days, the protective spell had bought their people just enough time to contact the servants of the Night Queen, who came and removed the entity. Now it would buy them only enough time to prepare a stronger enchantment, one that could sustain itself by means of the underground crystals. So formidable a creature required an energy-enclosure of greater power than itself. As they soon discovered, an enclosure of that nature could not be contained within a single room, and they observed in consternation how it widened and expanded until it encompassed a significant portion of their underground city.

This left them with two choices: live next to the Darker or relocate.

Despite the risks involved, they opted to seek out the worlds of their children.

In the Empyrean Wars, it was assumed that the Lepi, Gerb, Ru, and Kushiban were non-sapient animals; their intelligence helped them evade predation and aid the Allied Races, lending them a trickster reputation amongst spacers. But as weapon technology progressed in the War of Temporal Planes, so did their tricks begin to fail them, and they were faced with the possibility of being wiped out.

While the Rushban seemed safe enough on Phorose in the Colonies, the Kushiban were fighting off hordes of Xinkra, a formidable, three-meter-tall race of Rozzum. The Agorffi had driven off their wicked siblings from Agora, but the Caste remained a formidable organization that lived aboard their ships so as to evade justice. The Gerbs were deep in battle against the two-headed Slith serpents who had expanded their numbers considerably since being hurled through a wormhole to Yavin 13 during the Empyrean Wars. The Lepi lagomorphs in the Coachelle, Lylat, and Genus systems were also at war, now against the Night Queen who wanted their shipyards and ships.

Prior to their departure, the Arbrans consulted with the energy-eating, telepathic Hoojibs who lived on the surface of Arbra, elucidating their wish to ensure that the Darker did not escape. The Custodians of Arbra would ensure that none ever released that terribly entity, and if he did escape, they would do what they must.

The Arbrans then left for the homeworlds of their besieged offspring. In no one place did they long linger, for they knew the emissaries of the Night Queen were hunting them, but the aid they brought allowed those races to advance and thrive.

At some length, the Arbrans at last felt it was safe to settle, and they established a new civilization in the uninhabited Outer Rim world of Delari Prime. But again, delving into the parlous, esoteric arts and proscribed mantras, they tried to return to their original state of innocence, and again brought forth its antipode… But this time they unleashed upon themselves no *single* Darker, but an *army* of them!

These would later be called Cacodemons.

Intuiting the Arbrans' deepest fears, the Cacodemons summoned the agents of the Night Queen, who came to claim their prize. Diverted from its original course to seek and destroy the Shatras of Trancor and the hated Xantar who allied with them, the kilometers-wide *Marrow Gorger* (designed in the shape of Qusothhuga) came to visit death to the disloyal Precursor race. As its shadow passed over Delari Prime, it shot an asteroid at the planet and returned to its original mission. Then, the Cacodemons passed into the wan-mooned gulfs of the void so as to find and stalk new prey.

Although damage from the impact was blunted by the powers of the Arbrans, the attack, nonetheless, put the world on a closer trajectory to its twin stars, resulting in destructive winds, evaporated oceans, and a massive dust cloud that blocked out the suns, which left many dead. The survivors were forced to relocate once more, this time to the dwarf galaxies to see if they might yet find the Celestials.

ARRAKAN

To better thwart the Enemy, the faithful Arrak called upon the Celestials to request that they be *diminished*. The Ones would not normally have agreed to this, but as so many had sought to make themselves greater than others, it was refreshing to hear a race seeking the opposite. As per their instructions, they transformed the Arrak into hybrid, biomechanoid vessels. No two of these *Leviathan*-class transports would be the same. As with their Purrgil offspring, they could organically enter and navigate Hyperspace, enabling them to save from enslavement or death countless peoples who no longer had Hypergates and hadn't developed ships with hyperdrives. Their Duor and Battrach offspring races would now take their place as the Keepers of Arrakan, while the Duien undertook the task of serving as their living counterparts—an idea adopted years later with astromechs in mind.

One of the Arrak factions that declined to be altered departed instead for Massula, where they sought to break the cycle of war between its organic and synthetic lifeforms by creating a robotic intelligence charged with preserving life. But preserving self-destructive lifeforms was a contradiction that drove it to madness. So, taking inspiration from the Arrak, the intelligence created a race of biomechanical starships that would "preserve" life by scooping up sapient lifeforms and converting them into biomass to create more reapers. They then departed into the Void to slumber before beginning a new cycle of purges that continued until Humans from Arrth united Massula against them.

ARUUN

The strange Faruun had become obsessed with speed. They were race of aggressive Rozzum shipbuilders from Aruun, and the many spectators who came to the Harmatodromia races on that world marveled at the velocity and varying aesthetics of their ships, which they and their droids designed on forms insectile and pelagic. The most famous of the Faruun was Nugtosh, who first visited Skyriver in the final years of the Republic. While other Faruun continued to travel the circuit, he opted to remain on Malastare to enjoy the deadly podracing competitions held there.

Near the end of the Twilight Wars, an incident occurred on Aruun with the boorish Tof, who called them cheaters after one particularly vicious competition. This caused the Faruun to respond in a way that resulted in a reversion to their former disturbing ways: they attacked and ate the Tof before the eyes of everyone. Once this was done, the Faruun simply cleaned up and returned to their business as if nothing was amiss. But this faux pas (as they termed it) earned them the enmity of the Tof.

The Tof were a churlish, paramilitary branch of Terra II's navy called the Terror of Fath, or TOF. So addicted had they become to augmentation drugs, particularly an experimental batch of Munadaul tinctures with crystalline salts, that they'd irrevocably altered their genetic structure, growing massive while their skin took on a sickly green hue.[183] Those who survived the changes became stronger but also more belligerent.

After being repelled off of Chayooine, where they'd committed several violent acts in an attempt to take over that world, they were court-martialed by the Terran Defense Force. Stealing a cruiser, they reestablished themselves as raiders, going so far as to identify with the fanciful and archaic pirates of old, all the while calling in favors from their prior contacts to enable them to build a considerable enterprise. When this eventually drew the unwanted attention of the Galactic Union, they headed out to the far-off reaches of Firefist where they could rebuild without the interference of the Union or the Terran Defense Force breathing down their necks.[184]

Their conflict with the Faruun was but one of many steps along the path of radicalization, but they kept a tally of their enemies, and millennia later, when they'd grown sufficient in numbers, they sailed forth to conquer Aruun, Bree, and Nagi. But this would only push these three worlds to ally in secret with the Alliance of Free Planets and the Mandalorian Protectors to overthrow the Tof.

[Additional entries cut for time—*AH*]

[183] Munadaul is a forerunner of the mutagenic 3L41UH7 serum used by Atha Prime in the Clone Wars.
[184] Human migrants from Corona V encountered the Tof after the destruction of their homeworld, inspiring the design of their antiquated-looking solar sailers when they colonised Caltinia.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

WARRIORS OF SHADOW

Amongst the greatest of the galactic Defenders of this age were the Warriors of Shadow. And the Sith of Roon hated them with an unrivalled passion.

The Sith had twice failed to cow or convince the Taung to join their side. Too few in numbers to command them by force, they'd instead plotted to induce them by more surreptitious means. From the perimeter of their land, they kept watch over the years, abducting scouts, wanderers, and pilgrims from which they bred a generation of Sith-Taung hybrids to whom they taught the doctrines of the Left-Hand Path.

The Tsaung, as they were called, had grown to considerable numbers in the port city by the Roon Sea in the region of Nime. Although a distance from the Taung capital of Tauntoom and its surrounding provinces, it was close enough that their location was certain to eventually be "discovered" by the Warriors of Shadow who were always widening their circle of exploration as they wandered across far lands on their beloved Rockhoppers.

Conflict upon Roon was rare and limited to the wicked Shamunaar that hunted all manner of creatures, not merely for food but sport. When not fighting these or deadly packs of kalak, the Warriors of Shadow had catalogued numerous fauna in the wild, from pack animals like the ubiquitous banthas and mogos to goorls, who were tame and kept as pets.[185] There were also the annoying but harmless moorv primates that lived in and around the Pinnacles of Felth. But it was the Mudmen, a disconcerting race of silicon-based creatures, who they now followed to uncover their source. Arriving in Nime, they were shocked to find a colony of red-skinned Taung-like peoples.

Brought before the Ministry of Nime, which was made up of five elders and led by Malachi Phoenix, the Warriors were told that the Tsaung of Nime were a lost tribe of Taung whose ancestors had long ago been sent to explore the far reaches of Roon where they encountered and interbred with an indigenous but now sadly extinct clan of red-skinned Roonians. The Warriors had never heard this before but that didn't mean it wasn't possible, and as the tribe went out of its way to show them hospitality and even demonstrate their abilities, most Warriors let down their guard. Most impressive to them was their claim to have made the Mudmen, the larger ones of which served as guards, while smaller ones were kept as pets for their younglings.

The inquisitive Warriors of Shadow were eager to learn more, and the Ministry agreed to share their knowledge in exchange for their company and some of the common goods they'd brought with them. Phoenix also inquired about the crystals

[185] The word *banth* or *bantha* originally referred to any large beast.

the Warriors wore around their necks, but as the Warriors were unwilling to trade these, he said he understood and let the matter drop.

The Warriors of Shadow were led by Jirell of Jaudere, who was their most famous and respected member. Warning her inner circle to remain vigilant in all matters, she put on a placid expression as she went about the small city, taking particular interest in the social gatherings and cantinas which allowed her to slyly gather intel. *These people are seemingly open and friendly, and perhaps it is only my imagination, but is there a wary cautiousness behind their eyes? Are their smiles a little too broad? Is their solicitousness genuine or merely an affect?* In her gut, she felt that something was off. The spiritual residue produced by this "lost tribe" held a kind of elusive odium that she didn't recognize or like, but since it was nothing overt, just a feeling, she kept her own council until she could confirm or deny her misgivings.

The Ministry of Nime did not regularly socialize, but that was just as well since they would be the most circumspect. The polygamous males of Nime were a lubricious lot, and as Jirell sat with them over copious amounts of ale one night, she was surprised by how tight-lipped they remained, refusing even the prized spice she offered. Content to be patient, knowing the alcohol would eventually do its job, she feigned to down more than she actually did, noting that the locally produced brew had a distinctive stone-fruit taste that was quite good if less robust and complex than the outstanding potables they fermented in Nugnurra and Jaudere.

Jirell spoke casually and kept her conversation light. Apart from their clear desire for her, she found they were willing to talk about some of their traditions, though they remained careful to leave out details they likely knew would be off-putting to her. But there were enough hints of violence and cagey looks to set off Jirell's internal alarms, and they would not share their history, claiming it was "long and dull."

Commenting as to the fact that their communities were small, given the number of centuries they had been in the region, one man replied a little too quickly, "We used to lose a lot of people to the Shamunaar."

"You must be doing something right," Jirell praised. "I've seen entire villages leveled by the beasts. We are constantly on guard against them."

"We have a measure of control over the *elder* creatures," the man replied with a look that dared her to press on. So, they were testing her as much as she was them. She smiled charmingly and, to reinforce their perception of her as a simple warrior, made a toast: "To fending off ugly old monsters and forging beautiful new friendships."

From everyone she interviewed over the course of the ten days they were there, she gathered only that their history was either scant, unknown, or vague to them. The one thing Jirell could discern was that they were not as charitable as they seemed. Their stated goal was to merge communities, and seeing as several of her people had already begun having intimate relations with them, intermarriage would be the driving force of that desired union. While this was not an evil or abnormal objective, her senses were practically screaming with alarm. Before it was too late and a rift could be driven between them, it was time to make known what she'd discovered.

"As far as I am concerned, we have learned enough from the Ministry," Jirell told her sisters upon gathering them in private. "We have upheld our mission. Any more time here would be a distraction and one that my senses say is fraught with danger."

"How is *this* a distraction?" challenged Umlaa. "These people are *our* people and have been nothing but kind to us since we arrived, trading, teaching us their ways. They are not even interested in our crystals, which they must know are precious."

"Indeed, they have been *friendly*," Jirell responded. "But that is not—"

"And?" probed Umlaa. "You may want to remain solitary and pure, Jirell of Jaudere—as is your right—but not all of us do." That raised a few insalubrious cheers.

"You are free to be with whomever you will," Jirell responded hotly. "But I would hope you would be wiser than to jump into a sacred arrangement with Malachi Phoenix… or any of them, of whom we know so little."

"Who said anything about *marriage*!" Umlaa jeered.

"They are *hiding* something… something *dark*. Of this, I am certain. And I know I'm not alone. Do you not feel it? It is like a quagmire dragging us down."

"Always you see shapes in the shadows!" Umlaa retorted, undaunted. "So they have secrets. Do we not all? So they are strangers. Are we not strangers to them? Why should we expect them to divulge everything to us when we ourselves would not? Trust takes time. And trust has never been your strongest trait, *ori'vod*."

"For good reason, I'm afraid. Isra, tell them…"

While Jirell had been seeking answers and the other Warriors were enjoying themselves with the Tsaung, Isra had gone on a covert mission. "They have ships."

"What does that mean?" Umlaa asked.

"Two things," Isra returned. "First, they're old but equipped with hyperdrive, which we'd heard about from the Koboks." A small and peaceful settlement of Koboks dwelt far to the south on Nuurok, from which they'd pay annual visits to trade and feast. "Second, it puts their story as a lost tribe into question."

"I see Jirell's paranoia has infected you too," Umlaa replied, surprised at her faith in the Kobok rumor mill. "Malachi already told me they'd located a crashed fleet and were working on repairing them."

"Let us put that aside for now while you think upon it. There's another reason I've gathered us today. I've been given a new mission." Jirell knew that whatever the Ministry was up to, they had miscalculated. The Force was naturally strong in the Warriors of Shadow, and the bond between them was not so easily severed. There was more that she had not yet told them that had little to do with the Tsaung of Nime, who, more than ever, felt like a serious threat. Now she would reveal it. "I will not compel any to leave with me. Your choices have always been your own. I ask only that you consider that I have good cause for mistrust. You must now choose between our mission and this so-called *lost tribe*. There will be no dispute or rancor whatever you decide. I have been called in a vision of the Roonstone and must soon depart. Any who wishes can come with me, but I will not be returning to Roon."

The mention of the vision was enough to sway most, and it was for this reason that she'd saved it for last. The connection between a Warrior of Shadow and her Roonstone was special and unique. In simple terms, for one sister, it imparted peace and calm. For another, it gave strength and courage. For Jirell, it imparted visions, and her most recent one was unlike any she'd experienced before.

When word reached Malachi that some of the Warriors of Shadow would be leaving, he reasoned with the Ministry that this suited them fine. Since only the strong had been allowed to mature to adulthood, as was the Sith way, Tsaung numbers remained considerably smaller than the Taung. Yet, their purpose had never been to conquer the Taung in conflict, but rather to use marriage alliances to assimilate them into their culture. The good fortune of Jirell's departure would facilitate that.

Upon return to Tauntoom, Jirell gathered the Taung Elders, informing them of all that she'd learned of the Tsaung of Nime and what she suspected of Malachi Phoenix, recommending that they have no intimate dealings with them or their perverted magics. Then, she declared that she and some of the Warriors would be departing and the reasons why. Roonstone callings were respected by all Taung on Room, and she shared what she'd seen. She called it the Weaving of the Cloak of the Sith. The name puzzled her until she saw Sith fighting with Taung. There was confusion in this part of the vision, as some of the Sith looked like Taung and some of the Taung like Sith. Above all hung the rainbow-colored tail of a comet. The vision followed the comet's winding path as it forged a way through the treacherous nebula and beyond.

Several months later, she reconvened with the elders lounging outside of the hangar. To casual observers, they seemed to be relaxed, but Jirell knew better. The whole business with the Tsaung and her impending departure had them on edge.

"The drive is not yet beyond its prototype stage," Jessem of the Oann Clan, eldest of the Elders, reminded her. "Nor has it been tested. Maybe you should hold off…"

The Taung had learned long ago that they could no longer leave Roon. The Hypergate that they'd first used to come to the planet had been mysteriously destroyed and their system surrounded by a hazardous nebula. Several attempts to penetrate it had ended in tragedy. They hadn't known why, but due to the dark magic practiced on Tozarin, one of the moons of Iqoon in the Roon system where the End Lords had a large presence from years earlier, and where Lumiya would years later establish a base, the Son had weaved the Cloak of the Sith around the system while Daughter whispered in the dreams of the priests to be wary of enemies who appeared in the guise of friends. Notwithstanding, it was foretold in the visions of the priests that the Taung would grow to become many and settle across the stars.

Although they still had the ships they'd traveled with millennia earlier, they were now museum pieces, marveled treasures from a forgotten, ancient world and dependent on a functioning gate system to ever traverse space again. Even if they could find a way to escape the nebula, they would need a functioning hyperdrive.

For this reason, Jirell and Isra had earlier returned to Nime and stolen a ship.

From it, Isra and others had begun the work of duplicating a hyperdrive. She hadn't needed to say it, but they knew that if the Tsaung suspected her part in the theft, it would certainly start a war. Thankfully, they'd gotten in and out without being seen.

"The new drives will work," Jirell replied confidently. "And there are at least two others on the way."

"Duplicates of prototypes are still prototypes…" Elder Jessem returned.

"Isra doesn't need me for that. Besides, I don't *want* to leave, I *have* to. The Roonstone vision was clear. Soon enough, you all will."

Jessem's brow furrowed into a many-lined frown. "You're certain about this?"

"I don't know when. It will come during a time of terrible conflict."

"Let us hope I am long dead by then," Jessem grunted. At a look from Jirell, he added, "You are young and full of the fire of justice and valor. And well you should be! But if you live to reach my age, there are few things left to make life worth living—good ale and good cheer are a start!" A few other elders chimed in with "good women" and "good song," to which Jessem added a hearty, "Aye, and that requires peace. If war is coming, and if you're not here to fight, lass, best it be that I'm across the divide where the malt flows like rivers and the days are filled with mirth!"

Jirell gave a Taung hail and left to meet with the thirty Warriors at the hangar that held the newly-christened *Aranar*. She left behind the secret of the comet for those to follow out of the Cloak when the time was right. Her companion, Norella, whose Roonstone amplified her telepathic ability, would at that time inform Isra if they'd been successful. Isra, who had the most technical mind of all the Taung, would have to stay behind to continue the construction of additional hyperdrives.

As the Warriors boarded the ancient ship, they felt an admixture of anxiety, excitement, and melancholy, which only amplified as the vessel lifted up and exited the hangar doors, but as they were disciplined fighters, little of those emotions showed behind their stoic exteriors. The flight through atmosphere was terrifying, dreamlike, and awe-inspiring, and when it was done, not a few wished they could do it again.

Once in space, Jirell engaged the Isra Gatedrive, as they now referred to it. She clung tightly to the Roonstone around her neck. She understood the basic functions of what she had to do on her end. What she didn't know was where to go. Letting go of conscious thought, she allowed her fingers to do what they were told.

The coordinates set, they entered Hyperspace.

The *Aranar* emerged in the Tau Sakar system within the Abrion Sector, and from there Jirell was led to land on Tau Rak, the third planet of the system. Shortly after disembarking, they were greeted by a mixed race of envoys from an Essuline colony who shared a similar story, and others from elsewhere. "We've been expecting you, Sisters. I am Rinthya. With the aid of the noble Lord Arzach, whose mother revived an ancient line of Defenders, we established Tau Rak as a center to renew the Teachings of the Source. Come, you must be hungry and tired from your journey, and there is much we would like to teach you."

The Lord Azrach in question came up behind them with members of the Taarak. They were a formidable people of Human lineage. The Warriors of Shadow reached for the hilts of their swords. They had not forgotten their ancient hatred of Mankind or the deeds that had been done to their people on Notron. But Jirell held them back, listening to her senses; they told her they'd been brought there for a purpose. *Well, I can always draw my sword later.* "Welcome, Shadow Warriors," Lord Arzach stated, bowing his head courteously and pretending he didn't see anything untoward.

Jirell returned the greeting. Her tolerance of the Humans proved a test for her sisters who yet thought of that race as evil, but they trusted Jirell more than any other person alive and remained faithful to her even above their age-old animosity towards those that had nearly driven them to extinction.

That first evening, the Warriors ate well, heard stories, and were given a private and comfortable lodging in which to rest. "The Tsaung of Nime had also shown us hospitality, but here I detect something different. There is no taint of hidden mischief, nor are they evasive or wary in regard to their motives and history. And, yes, the absence of lecherous males bodes well!" That caused everyone to laugh, and they prepared for sleep, though they took turns keeping watch… just in case.

On the second evening, after another communal feast in which the Essulines explained more of their history and mission, Lord Arzach shocked the Warriors of Shadow with his speech: "I understand why you would be wary of my kind after the betrayal yours had received at our hands in the ancient days of Notron, your ancestral home, stolen from you by a wicked government and participatory military." That got everyone's attention. "Yes, I have studied your history. What we are asking you to do, in trusting and working alongside us, will be no easy task for you. I cannot make amends for the deeds of these men. Nor would I. We are each our own individuals and responsible for the choices we make, not that of our forebears or peoples. I only ask that you judge us as individuals. I know of something that will aid us in this endeavor. Jirell of Jaudere: I make request that you seek a new vision."

Jirell hesitated. She had rarely sought out visions, let alone publicly or in front of non-Taung. But despite her sisters' reservations, she felt safe amongst these people. When she grasped the Roonstone about her neck, something then occurred that had never occurred before: all of the Shadow Warriors experienced the same vision.

They saw the elusive Diathim, terrifying and beautiful, descend before them. But the vision shifted unto a score of fields upon which vicious battles took place and monstrous foes arose against whom they vied. "This is not a life for the faint of heart. You must choose," the Diathim's voice cut through the scenes of carnage. But the Warriors of Shadow had not lived soft lives and did not intend to start now. "I choose!" they each said in turn.

"Then let us together speak the Pact," Rinthya directed. As one, they recited:

To defend is the pact,
Until life's value has been taken for naught,
Then the pact is to avenge!

When it was complete, voices spoke out of the light that glowed above their heads: "Ride forth like the wind! Fight proud the adversaries of light, for you are the Defenders the Maker has sent!" At that moment, a great and tawny flock emerged out of Hyperspace; they were the pterodactyl-like Granger, more ancient than the Yehat and Pkunk of Gamma Serpentis I or the Galidyn of Fyodos to whom they are kin. Fierce in the face of evil were these brave creatures, courageous, and loyal above all. And they had come to serve as their steeds and fellow Defenders.

In the millennia to come, many would the Defenders defeat as they traversed the universe, and many were the enemies they made. And as each passed on, so too was their strength passed down to a new protector so that the power of evil might be contained for another generation. From them arose the Adepts of the White Current on Far Thanium, known more commonly as the Fallanassi.

As to the Warriors of Shadow who'd stayed behind under Umlaa's leadership, they rejected Jirell's counsel to avoid the Tsaung of Nime to whom they made marriage alliances. They and their children were taught the scatheful traditions and arcanic arts of the Enemy until by the next generation they were fully aligned with Sith ideology. Another thing these young Warriors of Umlaa were taught was that Jirell and her sisters were an existential threat, and so, before they returned to wipe them out, they must go forth to find and kill them first.

By the time the Tsaung of Nime had taken a join-or-die policy, the Taung had splintered into three camps. There was the army of the Tsaung Warriors of Nime; the proud Pure Taung made up of the Taung Elders and all who stood with them; and the Neutran, who were as the Taung of old and would not fight any of their brothers or sisters. Although ideologically divergent from the Pure Taung, the Neutran remained friends and allied with them in their opposition to the Warriors of Nime.[186]

Elbo J'karn of the Strong Arm Tribe was a Neutran spy in the camp of the Tsaung Warriors of Nime, and although she would later go over to their side, seduced by the copious lies they told, she'd succeeded early on in bringing word to them of not only the hostility brewing against the Pure Taung, but the fact that the Tsaung were Sith. But that was not all. The Koboks informed them that a colony of pureblood Sith, who had dwelt undiscovered until now in the faraway land of Iquoon, had recently marched to Nime to join their brethren in the fight, and their decorated leaders led them, riding upon Shamunaar!

It was not in the nature of the Taung to hold to thoughts of anguish or despair. They took this knowledge at face value and used it to prepare for the coming battle. The Neutran readied their fleet for escape and informed the Pure Taung that they would wait for them before they left. The Neutran descended from they who had been entrusted with the secret passage of the Rainbow Comet that Jirell had long ago told the Elders of. They, of course, had not wanted to leave, and the Pure Taung

[186] The term Neutran was initially used as an insult, a portmanteau of their netural stance and the name of their ancient homeworld Notron. It came to be embraced by them on their later world, Neutra IV.

refused until their enemies were broken. But these were a stoic people not goverened by strong emotion. All they knew was that Roonstone vision was at hand and their world would soon become polluted by bloodshed and the execrable rites of the Sith.

At this time, the Ministry of Nime bowed to the Sith Lords who had come. It was not the first time a representative had come to check on their progress and give instruction, but it was the first time the entire Sith people on Roon had come. As the Sith Lords were pleased with the progress the Tsaung had made over the long years, they sanctioned the Ministry, giving them a secondary role under them. But then they did something altogether disturbing. From an ancient tome whose title they could not yet read, the Lords spent the next several hours summoning a thing. It called itself Annat'hael the D'mi'go King, and said it would create an escape corridor for them that they could use to depart Roon once they'd killed or enslaved the remaining Taung.

The winged, antennae-headed creature was not happy to have been so compelled, and he announced in a disconcerting, buzzing voice: "Ere the next crescent moon, you will bring to me the minds that I require, and I shall permit your escape from Roon through a hyperlane that penetrates the Cloak of the Sith which I will now generate so that you see that the word of the Mi-Go King is not to be taken lightly."

And there, before their distant eyes, for not even the Sith Lords would go too near, with a strange and almost musical sound, the entity generated a twisty, sulpherous corridor. So, the giant fungal creature, contented with his work, hooted and buzzed as he stood before it, watching and waiting for them to make good on their promise.

Having grown into a formidable army with the addition of Taung recruits and the Sith of Iquoon, the Tsaung determined to go to war and bring back the requisite sacrifices to the D'mi'go King.

The Taung lost many in the bloody Battle of Tauntoom, but the Tsaung lost more, and were forced to regroup back in Nime. As it was the next crescent moon, the hideous Annat'hael confronted them, demanding what had been promised. When the Sith Lords began making excuses, the creature moved effortlessly and without another word flew swiftly upon each leader, removing their brains from their heads. Nine bodies fell to the ground, their craniums hollowed out. Satisfied, the entity made a weird buzzing sound and vanished through the door of his twisty Death Wind Corridor.

When the rest of the Tsaung and Sith gathered their courage, they followed suit, not even bothering to bury the corpses. In the ancient ships that had first brought them to Roon, save for the one Jirell had long before stolen, they flew through the corridor where they soon rejoined the Sith in the yet ongoing Twilight Wars.

The Neutran and Pure Taung, now reunited, took to the ships that had over the centuries been outfitted with working hyperdrives at Isra Station, and followed the path of the Rainbow Comet which, as providence would have it, was just then passing along its annual journey.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FIVE

FAREWELL TO THE GODS OF DARK ILLATHURION

DANSE MACABRE

With battles once more raging across the galaxy, Thargorograht determined that a sufficient period had been granted the Osserians to restore Urthha back into a habitable realm, and she went forth with her festering hordes to test the Infinity Gate's destructive power in demonstration of her ascendency from Night Queen to Goddess of the Eternal Night.

When she and her swarm arrived, she found the planet torrential and potentially hazardous to her servitors. *Unless something unexpected has befallen the Osserians, there is no excuse for this!* she thought. *And if they've figured out my plot and ceased their efforts, I will think up imaginative ways to compel them!*

It was not by unhappy chance that Nyeegath happened to spy Thargorograht and her buzzing servants descending upon Urthha's orbit. Ooradryl had long suspected his sister of hatching webs within webs, and though the extent of her latest designs was not fully known, Nyeegath flew forth to confront her.

"Dark Greetings, O Spacious Sister!" he said, noting the slight stiffening of her limbs that indicated her surprise. "I do not know this world, though it seems familiar to one of the Earthworlds… but there are *so* many after all!" he chuckled repellently.

Thargorograht didn't fail to pick up the underlying meaning, though she feigned conciliation while deciding how best to handle this unpleasant situation. "Well met, Edacious Eremite! Ever my children seek out morsels… as *you* surely understand."

"Indeed, though it is odd for you to venture out of the Great Black Nest on so *humble* a task…" he remarked, "or have you sent all of your scouts to fight in the wars raging within and without Illathurion?"

Tragically for him, Nyeegath was cunning and astute. It would not be long before he unraveled her plot. As she had not yet secured the Infinity Gate, it was too soon for the Kindred of Ooradryl to know of her plans. "The Kindred may have abandoned your claim to that realm, but I have not," she replied, changing the subject away from Urthha to a longstanding controversy.

"Dominion of the Outside World does not belong to you alone, *sister*," Nyeegath said with barely contained scorn, "but to *all* the surviving offspring of the Architects, as granted us by the Eldritch Ones."

"Would the Kindred share the galaxy with the Devourer?" she asked pointedly.

Nyeegath hesitated; his silver coverings shimmered at the thought. "We would not."

"Unlike Typhojem, our *much*-mourned brother, he remains a threat. His cancer seeps out from his prison, and yet the Elder Races remain blind."

"They cannot hold him," Nyeegath agreed. "One such as he cannot be contained."

With lubricous fervor, she resounded, "But if *we* had dominion, *we* could!"

"So we believe as well."

"We are in agreement, then," she said, slightly relieved. "I will first establish dominion in the outside realm of Skyriver, where you and the Kindred will have your choice of domains upon which to rule and feed…"

"No," he declared haughtily. "You were not appointed *our* queen when the Mighty Mother perished!"

"Who, then, will you serve if not me?" she shot back angrily. "Am I not the rightful heir of the great Architects who brought us into these spheres? Am I not the one who directed us through the Cosmic Wars? Was I not ever loyal to our masters, for never did I turn to others as our late-lamented brother had!"

"Your kind will never understand. *The Kindred serve none but the Kindred!*"

"Your contrariness is not hard to comprehend! Do you think our great Mother who brought us into being was blind to your cupidity and megalomania. Do you think I was not aware of the pact you had contracted in secrets in those long-ago years? Yes, there is *much* you have kept concealed that we overlooked for the sake of your pride and autonomy…" Borne from indignation, her scatheful words were a tactical error on her part that would only escalate ancient rivalries and suspicions, but at the moment she'd uttered them, she didn't care. She had put up with their otiose self-aggrandizement for far too long.

Nyeegath puffed out. "Even if the Dread Powers had not made us co-heirs of this expanse, we would not serve *you!* You may rule the night and so think yourself greater than all, but *we* are the *god-shamblers of the stars!* We have no mother! No father! Tell us from whence we came? Think you that we are of *Zhothaqquah, your abandoned offspring?!* Think again, Vermin-Queen!! You speak of secrets, but long have you kept secret your strategem for *sole* preeminence! Why else did you not come to us for aid in conquering Skyriver? Did you think we would not find out? Did you think you could keep us restrained in Illathurion? Ha! Wretched Tilotny once thought as you before we ruptured the dimensional wall and conquered vast regions of our own! So, go now! Take your virulent swarms to fight in that realm. But to ensure your veracious *equity,* we will take possession of *this* world and *whatever power you think to hide from us!*"

So, they *knew*… The Kindred of Ooradryl could not be silenced, tempted, or swayed. Further, they would go to any length to ensure their place in the grand scheme. She considered going along with his plan. It *was* the simpler way. And perhaps had it been the War of Temporal Planes, she would have. But now her anger had grown hot and she considered the Kindred's offspring—swelled to a disturbing number since the prior war—and she thought upon her own vast and hungry hordes. True, the galaxy was incalculably large, but once she ruled it, her children's children's children would spawn beyond all proportion—as would the Kindred's endless offspring. Before long, one or both factions would encroach on the other's territories. It was inevitable. In that future, whatever accord they'd made would shatter. With two major powers presiding, each concerned solely with their own subjects, there would again be war. To have sacrificed so much to again put her descendants through a conflict that would see unending years of destruction was a price not worth paying for the sake of an imposed amity and an unwanted quasi-alliance now. Though she did not relish it, she had long known that eventually her siblings and their brood would have to be dealt with.

Thargorograht shot forth hundreds of viscous, ropelike webs onto Nyeegath's argent shields! The entity was taken by surprise, for who would dare assault *him*? As he turned to escape, the Night Queen pulled with all her might, snapping off his ventral coverings. With his front exposed, she vented hundreds of paralyzing tendrils and venomous gossamers stronger than steel to enshroud Nyeegath's precious organs.

But these were not the Kindred's only defenses. Nyeegath's maw opened wider than it had ever opened before, and he began to *suck*. She had seen this power on display. It easily devoured lesser beings, but she had no idea what affect it might have on one such as her. She didn't have to wait long to find out. The drag was near inexorable, akin to the pull of a black hole, and as her sable bulk was drawn into his mouth, she came alarmingly close to being devoured whole. Had it not been for her now frenzied Disciples of the Night Spirit—who flew in wrath to the aid of their beloved mistress, biting, rending, slashing and tearing at Nyeegath's inner organs—she might then and there have perished.

With a furious wrenching, Thargorograht ripped apart her adversary's entrails, and as he convulsed, she snapped off the ebullient protuberance that served as his brain, leaving the remains of Nyeegath splashed open in contorting jerks. Thargorograht commanded her attendants to eat away at all that remained. They hungrily obeyed her so that not a single trace of Nyeegath was left, save for his argent coverings which she now took and buried. But she knew it was too late… Nyeegath had already called out to Ooradryl who, in the death-throes of his duplicate, saw through his eyes and witnessed his sister's betrayal!

Now in terrible haste, for she could sense the wrath of Ooradryl and his death-train arriving, Thargorograht commanded her minions to descend and take command of the destructive capabilities of the Infinity Gate. If successful, the Kindred would no longer matter. The galaxy would belong to her alone, with none to oppose her.

But they wouldn't leave her side, for they were now staring out into the distance where amassing globes of light were approaching, lighting up the night skies with an eerie, silver glow. For the Night Queen, who now gazed at it as well, it was like the haunted eidola of a defiled dominion come to forge a new empery of its own. This was *not* her enraged sibling, but what it appeared to be could not be, for that one was long dead… Yet as the lucent globules continued to draw nearer, she paled. The old prophecy had come to pass. *Wu-Zothek had returned from death!*

Wearied from her battle with Nyeegath, but too late to flee, and knowing she could not escape the Beyond One anyway, she again unleashed her cinnabar death-webs as the implacable revenant drew ever nearer. Her raging servants rushed to destroy this new threat as they had Nyeegath, only to find that his power was considerably more obdurate. As if one of the Charnel Gods himself, the entity rained down a storm of pulsing fire-light that scorched Thargorograht and her irate armies.

Few amongst the Disciples of the Night Spirit lived to tell the tale, and those that did were driven mad by the violent death of their beloved queen. As the Night Queen felt herself dying, destroyed by a supernatural light, she sent out a telepathic burst to all of her offspring and any adopted races that she'd imprinted on, imparting her power unto them, urging them to survive, hide, and protect their worlds. Thus, the vast insectoid armies once more scurried off into seclusion.

THE SECOND BATTLE OF ENDOR

Feeling the death-rattle of their Mother, at once, each of her Eldest Daughters declared herself the successor and rightful heir to the throne. This was, of course, challenged by the others, leading to war within the Great Black Nest of Illathurion.

But for the Wizards of the Night Spirit who had been sent to Lesser Tana to rescue Moragarom, they saw a great eclipse block out the sun at the same moment that they felt the death of their Mistress. Stricken by immeasurable grief but loathe to return to their cold, empty worlds—which were even now preparing for war—the Wizards raged at the inhabitants of the Tana moon, thirsting to destroy every living thing in their path until the world that had been promised their queen was drowned in the blood of their enemies. But the Monitors and Protectors of Tana once more came together.

This would later be known as the Second Battle of Endor.

Lord Soros arrived with death in his wake. Her name was Wyyyschok. As with all the Great Spider Queens, she did not possess particularly tender feelings towards her Mother, though she thought it a shame that one so great as she should perish at the hands of an outsider. But Wyyyschok was more regretful that she wasn't in Illathurion to claim the throne. As to the plight of her elder sister, Moragarom, beset as she was by the snares of the cruel Monitors, she thought, *If my poor sister has been killed, there will be one less to vie for my rightful place as Queen of the Night Spirit on* this *world at least! I will see for myself if this Lesser Tana is, indeed, a land of many delicacies.* Wyyyschok had by this time grown immense, as had her powers, which she now used against any and all adversaries she met. She was soon confronted by the Monitors. *So puny are these morsels and yet so filled with energy! How delicious they will be!*

The Second Battle of Endor surpassed the first in gruesomeness, but Lesser Tana's Protectors had been trained for this. They howled against the invaders as teeth and claws tore against the maddened Wizards of the Night Spirit. Still, it was not enough. The battle was exciting to Wyyyschok. It had been some years since she'd last fought a foe worthy of her time. An uncanny shape then joined the fray. She winced.

This is no mere Monitor, but the very Demon who'd permitted my departure from Illathurion long before! Indeed, it *was* Horliss-Horliss who confronted her now, but this time not one word did he speak, for he'd witnessed her treachery firsthand. In a flicker, her great immensity began to shrink to that of a poor and tiny spider-creature.

Enraged but impotent to do a single thing in her defense, she crawled off to find a gloomy cave in which to spin her webs. It would take time, but slowly and surely, she would grow once more as she feasted on the tasty orts who ventured too near her cave. But she would never attain to the fabulous immensity she'd been before, for a fierce intruder would one day come to her lair wielding a wicked sword of light….

With the Great Spider Queen out of the way, Horliss-Horliss began to hunt for the terrible creatures of Moragarom who'd been roused by the Disciples of the Night Spirit.

The Monitors, meanwhile, went to battle against the Night Herald and his acolytes, coming upon them like four mighty blasts of ball-lightning! No mere warlock could stand before them, and when the last of their number fell, Lord Soros fled back to Sarufur, content that he'd done his part. With the Night Queen dead, he would lie low and wait to see who of her Daughters would emerge as victor, and by her side he would avenge his former mistress and rule the expanse.

The Wizards were in a fury and tore apart the Ewok shaman before he could even speak the charm of *yehk sirut* that would open the portal back to their realm.

As all hope died, a humble tribesman of the Ewoks, Adder Hive, came running forth, calling for bodyguards. He'd been discreetly communing with the Indur Elders who'd entered the Sunstar and had finally received the answer to the question he'd asked: "How do we banish the Wizards of the Night Spirit?"

Reciting the words in his mind over and again, Adder Hive fought his way into the eerie ruins of Moragarom's fortress within the Forest of Thorns which his protectors and allies stood guard over. These strongest of the Ewok, Dulok, Yuzzum, and Gharial warriors fended off cruel attacks by their enraged enemies who seemed to have an inkling of what the tribesman was up to and roared after him in wrath.

Ignoring the leering stone statue of the Windagon, whom the Ewoks called Treerot, and the frozen form of Moragarom, he began to chant the *yehk sirut* runes. He knew he'd failed when nothing happened. For even a shaman, one wrong word or missed syllable could ruin the incantation, and he was just a novice. His friends would not hold out long against the furious Wizards, and by their distant screams he could tell their numbers were shrinking.

At last, Adder Hive uttered what he believed was the correct formula and watched in exhilaration as the rift in the Endor Gate above opened! He followed it up with a spell of *yowah ehda*, an easier rune to remember, which sent the roaring Wizards of the Night Spirit hurtling back to their ruined worlds in Illathurion. The gate was then sealed behind them and the Monitors made short work of those left behind.

Adder Hive, "the Jinn," as he was now nicknamed upon his appointment to Medicine Man, later returned to the Forest of Thorns. He didn't want anyone getting in here and seeing the terrible faces of those trapped there. Speaking an enchantment taught to him by the Leaf Queen, he caused the trees to grow into a dense barrier around what remained of the fortress so that none might accidentally discover and set them free. There the two entities would remain for long, long years, one encased in stone and one encased in ice. But one day, the fallen Jotnar would come and burst open a hole in the Forest of Thorns. They would enter the ruins of Morag's fortress, which by then was little more than a stone circle, and to a designated place in their far-off keep they would take the evil statue of the Windagon for debased worship.

With their great victory, the benevolent Protectors of the Endor moon rejoiced at a Grand Feast, celebrating their triumph. The Monitors, resuming their less intimidating forms, told heroic tales as sonorous, melancholic music was played in accompaniment. These tales would continue to be recited and performed over the generations, honoring the great Hexprak, the name by which they referred to Horliss-Horliss, who'd vanquished the Great Spider Queen; the Light Spirit, Wutzek, who'd defeated the Night Queen; and the Great Spirit, who was the Father of Lights. Included in their songs and stories were Adder Hive and the various heroes and heroines of the two terrible battles they'd fought.

Following the celebration, the Ewok tribe that guarded the Sunstar were advised to leave their village for the far-off Forest of Simoon so as to better protect the powerful gem from those who might seek it out, for there were yet creatures loyal to the Night Spirit who dwelt in the nearby hills, caves, and woodlands.

Over the long years, as memories faded into mist and new tribal leaders and shamans came about who had less wisdom and even less interest in the history of their peoples, the tales took on a different character, a less honorable nature that mixed history with superstition. As tribes fell into pantheism, they forgot their nobler heritage and no longer read from the scrolls—for which reason the trees began to speak only to the woklings.

The Ewoks also grew haughty, treating their fellow Protectors as lessers. It was in this way that they earned the antipathy of the Duloks, Gharial, Jotnar, and other warrior tribes who had been just as instrumental in the defense of their moon.

The Gharial had for long years wished to travel the stars and had learned sufficient skills from the pilots and mechanics who'd crashed there in the intervening time. After the Gharial Soothsayer predicted that war was coming again to their world and that they had no part to play in it, they agreed it was time to depart. But first they would visit their fellow Protectors to warn them of what the Soothsayer foretold. When they went to the largest Ewok tribe and tried to tell the proud chief that the Night Spirit would return, their words fell on deaf ears. He and his Medicine Man would pay them no heed, claiming that they were spreading lies and working with the Duloks to unseat them from their position of authority.

So, wiping the grime off their feet, they left them to their own fate and finished restoring a small fleet of viable ships. With them came several Yuzzum who also sought out a new life on other worlds.

Of the Gharial who chose to remain behind, they would later be known as the Lizard Warriors. But the Gharial who went forth to settle colonies on Drackmar, Druulgotha, Gormdin, Hoszh Iszhir, and Nahsu Minor took on new racial names so that they would not be so easily tracked down when the Night Spirit and her abominable Nytocris came looking.[187]

[187] The Gharial of Gormdin split into a peaceful and violent faction, the latter of whom were defeated and exiled, going on to form alliances with other reptilitan and non-reptilian races that became part of their hegemony. Rumors claim they'd found an extant passage in the Void of Chopani to… elsewhere. Those known as the Druulgothans would come to regret their cowardice and rejoin the fight, only to flee again when their adopted homeworld of Druul was targeted for destruction.

CHAPTER SIXTY-SIX

THE ARDOR OF OUTLAND SUNS

For the Osiarch, the time had come to depart. The threat of the Ancient Ones had been contained, the Architects were no more, and the Old Ones were dead or diminished. Although the Twilight Wars continued, the battles being waged were mainly amongst mortals for the lust of greed, pride, and power. The Whills would always remain, and new Defenders were yet arising. The last of the Engines of Defense, the Tho Yor, would one day traverse the vast leagues of space to collect those attuned to the Force from numerous races who would study and grow to become the next Guardians and Protectors of the Balance.

Nonetheless, for Lluxos, who'd loved Skyriver as one might a child, this was a new and terrible grieving. He had given the peoples of the galaxy guidance, hope, love, and freedom. But they had grown up and turned away from those things; so would they now have to make their own way. He'd not made the best choices either; his inability to let go had caused problems. He'd sent Xurz back to the Primary Universe, for there had occurred a sharp contention between them, as he believed Lluxos should have done more. Likewise, he'd sundered from Marutz, with whom there had also been a deep disagreement and neither would now speak to the other.

Lluxos would leave the galaxy to others who might do better. He knew he would be forgotten by most. Already the galaxy was beginning to forget. They hadn't wanted to understand all that had happened to bring about the Cosmic Wars or accept culpability for their own diminished states, and so they rejected the truth for comforting lies promulgated as sophisticated and wise. In this way were the Celestials erased from history and the Firstborn reduced to exotic aliens. Upon this foundation of falsehood had been constructed an additional intricate web of deceit regarding origins, dates, and events. And so the races would fall into ignorance and ignominy.

So he said goodbye to the galaxy that he'd first conceived so long ago. In sempiternal sorrow would he keep an eye on its developments, consoling himself that it was necessary and that the prophecy that was coming was bigger than him. The Final War and Restoration would see his vision of peace and love realized for all time.

The Ones, however, had remained, as has been the plan. Now, as the turbulence of the galaxy cyclically swung towards cruelty, violence, and oppression, so had Elegast come to see how truly the Maker had spoken through the vision of Lady Braghlei, for Son and Daughter had become deeply affected by what seemed like an ever-present cycle of hostility and mistrust. Eipha and Niphal had been well aware of the drift of sapients towards destruction, and to guide them back from the brink was the very reason for which they'd come. Yet, now that they were interacting with and even walking amongst the mortal peoples of the galaxy, they felt themselves growing ever

more irritated, impatient, and despondent at these beings who seemed to wilfuly cast-off wisdom and refuse to learn from their mistakes.

The Wellspring of Balance, the Font of Power, and the Pool of Knowledge had been maintained on Vitae to ensure that Father, Son, and Daughter would—in their physical forms—remain nourished over the ages, for although they were eternal beings on a world in which time passed differently, still it passed, and the bodies and minds in which they indwelt needed sustenance.

Eipha gravitated towards the Font of Power in order to regain his physical and emotional strength; Niphal drifted towards the Pool of Knowledge in order to regain her mental energy and acuity. Yet, both seemed unremittingly drained by the near-constant galactic imbalance so that, in due course, the differences between them magnified to the point that they were less paragons of balance and light to the galaxy and more as avatars of a black and white duality. Son turned world-weary and cynical, while Daughter became sanctimonious and judgmental, and they began to resemble the extremes found on so many worlds. Father urged them to drink of the opposite waters exclusively, and this helped for a time. But the problem returned, for it was not the Pool or Fountain that was the problem but something pernicious and unseen—though whether it came from within or without, they could not discern.

Upon Elegast's suggestion, Son and Daughter departed on a journey to search for answers. As part of his expedition, Eipha plumbed the horrors of the Hellworlds as a kind of assassin, convinced that if he could defeat the unseen, malevolent, and controlling force that yet dwell there, he might be made whole again.

As part of her expedition, Niphal traveled to the Sacred World of Isorropía, home of the Shamaness who guarded the Midichlorians that emanated from the Wellspring of Life, for she thought that if she could bathe in that world's pure light, she might find ultimate restoration.

Only after they'd departed did it occur to them that they hadn't told Elegast where they were going before they'd left. *Was that unwise?* they each wondered. *Had I feared disapproval? Why would I wish to circumvent his advice? We are free agents,* Son *and* Daughter *in name only, who must do what we must to solve the riddle.*

When they finally returned from their voyages, Elegast expressed concern for their long absence. Also, something was off with them. They seemed hesitant to speak of where they'd gone, and when they revealed it at last, he was taken aback by their measure of imprudence. Not wishing to exacerbate matters, however, he let it pass.

Addressing Son with some circumspection, he asked, "What answers did you find?"

"There is horror beyond imagining in the Nine Hells," Eipha stated, his brow furrowed sourly in recollection. "It is a counterworld of nightmare and madness wherein dwell things that should never have come to be. Wide portals beneath the surface of the Earthworlds lead to them. I sought evidence of their masters but could find none… and yet, it was as if their eyes bored into me, their hate a physical blow. There are many places to hide and much that is not what it seems. At last, I drew some wretched being out of hiding, a servant called the Cold One, who nearly succeeded in stabbing me with *this*!" Eipha brought forth the Dagger of Mortis.

"Did he cut you?" Niphal asked solicitously.

"Only a nick…"

Elegast held the weapon before him. "It is infused with evil magics, but there is something more to it… a *will*… it echoes of those that gather strength in the Gunninga Gap and wields a kind of pull like a sweet melody that hides malicious implication and plays ceaselessly in your mind."

Then, turning his attention to Daughter, Elegast asked, "And of you Niphal? What answers did you find?"

"The Wellspring of Life is all beauty and light in its greatest intensity," she started. A look of rapturous delight spread across her face as she recalled it. "It is like a childhood place of bliss that one has lost and never thought to find again. The beings that dwell there are filled with such love and promise, but of their mistress who oversees them, I could find nothing. It was as if she concealed herself from me. I fear that I can never return there, but it is all I will ever dream of so long as I dwell in this realm, for at no time before have I felt such sweetness and warmth. To remind and comfort me, I have taken this lone altar that called to me." She transported before them the Altar of Isorropía, later known as the Altar of Mortis. It was pyramidal and, in some ways, resembled Splendid Ap, though its color and face were different.

"Did you open it?" asked Eipha.

"Of course!" she replied. "It shall never part from me."

Elegast touched its flat top. "It is infused with the light… but more so with an *intelligence*… a benevolent sentience strong with conviction and hope. I am not certain how wise it was to bring these objects here. I fear they will only worsen the divide. But what is done is done. We will safeguard them together so that the energies they emit will create a neutral grey that no adversary will detect."

"You have something further to tell us…" Niphal stated.

"Yes… in the time that you were gone, I embarked on… my own journey," he said, his tone trepidatious, "partly in search of you, for though you clearly do not know it, *you have been gone for years!*"

That brought looks of shock and apprehension to their faces.

"You must be mistaken!" Eipha exclaimed. "We have been in and out of this dimension countless times whilst aiding the First Ones. Never has this occurred."

"We were gone for barely a few days," added Niphal. "Even with the varying movements of time between realms, that should not be possible."

"The Charnel Worlds and Isorropía may yet move at a different pace," Elegast stated. "But come and drink." He led them to the Wellspring of Balance. "You have been without it for too long." After they helped themselves and became visibly refreshed, he continued. "You're aware that the power of the Font and Pool derives from the very Lifestream of the galaxy that imparts the life-energy of the Force to trillions of souls, without which they could not live. What you do *not* know that I have learned is that when one drinks of, or bathes in, the waters when one is imbalanced, it worsens the imbalance. For this reason, you must cease drinking from them and imbibe only from the Wellspring of Balance until you are healed."

Although Son and Daughter heeded this advice, with the galaxy interminably threatening to tip the scales into darkness, their natures again grew opposed, and so their thoughts returned to those strange and fascinating realms they'd visited.

Thenceforth, on a day in which they had a particularly contentious argument and transformed into their bestial forms in frustration and anger, they accidentally destroyed the Wellspring of Balance. This was a terrible shock to them, and they immediately forgot what they'd been fighting over and resumed their Sephian forms.

Father was aghast at the destruction of the Wellspring, as it now fell upon him alone to maintain peace between them. At first, this was simple enough, as they'd been chagrined by their actions; but with the span of days upon unhealed wounds, they once again grew ill. Without the Wellspring to refresh them, they drank of the other waters. Elegast became wearied in his task, unable even to restore his own balance. In this way did a deep loneliness set in, and he began to regret having come to this plane.

So it was that Father accepted into their lives a stranger.

She was as beautiful and graceful as the Sephi of old and appeared as light and gay as the Diathim, save that she had no memory of her past or even of her name, recalling only that she'd visited several worlds and had odd encounters upon them. Elegast had encountered her on his journey. Unable to detect any evil or deception in her, he concluded that providence must have brought her from Millius Prime to his company. He'd parted from her only to inform Eipha and Niphal, not wishing to spring any surprises on them without first discussing it with them.

He now invited her to stay on as a servant, and while this was disconcerting to them at first, it quickly proved to be a happy distraction from the endless struggles that beset them. There was something familiar about her, but none could place it, which made it as a beguiling mystery. Yet as she proved industrious, wise, and impartial in the handling of disputes, possessing a gentle touch and grace of nature, she soon came to be beloved by the Ones.

The only things forbidden her were the waters of the Font of Power and the Pool of Knowledge, for Father explained that they had been sanctified only for them; but she had no interest in anything but the well-being of the family and happily conceded.

Erelong, she became Father's wife and came to be known as Mother to Son and Daughter, and in the sunny years that followed, the family were hale and whole. That the galaxy held to a measure of peace was taken as a sign that it was meant to be.

Lazing under a Rainbow Eucalyptus, the morning star twinkling above as the mammoth butterflies flitted about the boughs and Nuuswan migrated across the plains, Elegast had a realization: *Son is akin to the embodiment of power as Daughter is the embodiment of wisdom. If I am as justice, then Mother must be as love, for what greater servant is there than love? So are the four traits of the Eternal in balance. Surely, this was the will of the Force—a gift from the Supreme Maker for our great sacrifice. Mother has brought nothing but joy and peace to us, sublimating Son and Daughter's negative energies into useful purposes.*

But just then, like a sudden and unwelcome burst of thunder, Lady Braghlei arrived. Feeling her presence, Father went to greet her at the Circle of Salaam. Her face looked displeased, but it seemed this was ever her mien. Eipha and Niphal, having also felt her arrival, joined them there.

"Why have you allowed this stranger, whose guise even *I* cannot penetrate, to dwell with you here on *this* world?!" the Shamaness of the Whills demanded when she appeared before them, her words a tightly controlled storm. Elegast would himself have

become angry had Mother not left earlier for the Arbor to converse with the Camphor and Dragonsblood trees, which told tales and sang songs of far-off lands of long ago.

"She has *restored* balance," Elegast asserted good-naturedly. "Her nature is akin to the Diathim. Odd that it is not clear to you as well."

"It is *not* clear," Lady Braghlei replied. "Only those mad Celestials known as the Transuranae have lost their memories before. Are *you* losing your mind?"

"Surely what you say is not true," Eipha hinted unkindly, "or have you forgotten your old companion already?"

"The *Guardian's* choices are his own." She would not so easily be baited.

"No Celestial had been killed before Wutzek, either," Niphal interjected before Elegast could reveal that both she and his brother had lost time and memory. "There is much even *we* do not know."

"Let us cut to the quick: I sense danger to you and to this galaxy that we have dedicated ourselves to protect. I can see how deeply you love her, Elegast, but do not repeat the error of Cherlindrea when she allowed Humans upon her world; that is *not* the way."

"Did we not all receive the same vision?" Elegast asked philosophically. "Andowyne would have fallen to the Malevoiy had it not been for 'Cherlindrea's Error!'"

"And yet, if the Humans hadn't arrived in Skyriver, the Agioiy would never have become the Malevoiy! Arrogance is the insistence of personal interpretation as the only true one. We do not yet know the full import of her decision, but I know this: not *our* Andowyne alone has suffered, but *three* Andowynes!"

"Apeiron and Hyperion are the result of Wutzek's child, not the Fāta." It was not a reminder he needed to make, but Lady Braghlei tended to place blame too readily.

"You also seem to forget that it fit the prophecy," argued Eipha emphatically as he and his sister joined the fray.

"And what does one *touched by the shadow* know of prophecy?"

That served to silence Eipha for a time as he pondered the depths of her abilities and what exactly her words implied.

"I have not permitted her to drink of the waters," Elegast said calmly, drawing on what peace he could summon. This turn of events was disheartening, but he would not contend with the Shamaness. A mysterious entity she was, and a cantankerous one at that, but she was a true ally, nonetheless. "Moreover, she has no interest. She is merely content to serve in love. Is that not our commission?"

"I am not sure the Priestess fully comprehends love, Father," interjected Niphal, not bothering to hide her resentment. She'd not forgotten how Lady Braghlei had avoided her when she'd arrived on Isorropía. Niphal thought she'd forgiven the slight, but clearly it still stung. "Living alone for so long has changed her into a kind of rule keeper. I do not hold this against her, for we are all changed."

"Niphal," Braghlei said stentoriously, commanding her attention. "Your incorrect assumption further points to the issue: you came unbidden and unbalanced to a realm that will tolerate neither; nor could *you* for that matter. Even now, I see that it continues to affect you." When Niphal didn't respond, the Shamaness went on. "All of you—control your excessive emotions and misplaced loyalties. Send the stranger back to the moons of Iego, and if, indeed, she is a lost Diathim, they will recognize her."

But Niphal was not ready to let it go quite so easily. "Are they greater than we that they should be the judge of this matter? How many *Diathim* fell during the wars? How many of the Fāta?"

"And *that* is the point!" the Shamaness retorted. "The fallen remain a threat."

"Do *you* sense that she has turned to darkness, Lady Braghlei?" Niphal retorted. "Because none of us do…"

"Niphal makes a valid point," started Elegast. "She's brought us balance. If I send her away, Son and Daughter will move to extremes again. Even before the Wellspring of Balance was destroyed, they were teetering on the brink."

Eipha and Niphal did not appreciate hearing Elegast speak of them in that way in front of the Shamaness, but they remained stonily silent, shamed but cognizant of his attempt to reason with her.

"I *know*," she started. "I came to restore the Wellspring of Balance so that you might be restored; but I see now that the balance yet tilts to one side or the other, and only the ultimate Chosen One can restore it. I suspect this is because you house the Dagger of the Serpent." That caught their attention. "Oh yes, despite the presence of the Altar that you *stole* from my realm, I know it is here. You cannot protect the Mortis Blade from those who will try and take it. You cannot even protect it from *yourselves!*"

"And yet, we *have* protected it!" Eipha stated with a sly smile as if that fact proved everything she'd said wrong. Elegast frowned. He didn't like the fact that they had begun to see the Shamaness as an adversary and decided to speak with them about it later. "Now, will you repair the Well and be off? One as *touched by the shadow* as I am grows tired quickly and needs his rest."

But if he thought this thrust had ended the matter, he was in for a surprise. "No. I do not think I will arm this realm with yet another source of power. The taint of darkness has already taken hold, though you all refuse to see it. This wound is one that no amount of water can heal. Heed my counsel and abandon these material forms. Return to your original realm. Only then will the Dagger, and the three of you, be truly safe."

"If we had wished safety, we would not have come in the first place," Niphal stated.

"Nor is it in our nature to abandon our responsibilities," returned Elegast, shocked that she had made such a suggestion.

"You *already* have!" Lady Braghlei returned hotly. "Have you forgotten the prophecy uttered long before?"

Elegast sighed. "We have debated it endlessly. The course of wisdom is unclear in this regard. It may be that to forsake her is the *very* failing that will bring about the prophecy! I cannot risk that. I must do what my heart tells me is right."

"The decision must be yours," she relented, "and I will not argue against the course of love—if, indeed, compassion is at its root. However, know this: when I looked upon her, I saw the love she has for you all. There is *no* dissimulation there…"

"Then, what are we arguing about?" exclaimed Eipha, exasperated.

"A great blight is coming," the Shamaness declared.

A look of mild reproach crossed Elegast's features. "You live in a realm of light, Lady Braghlei. Perhaps you see naught but shadows when you step outside of it. But if indeed a great blight were coming, would the Osiarch have departed?"

"Perhaps it is a *private* interpretation of prophecy that she speaks of," Niphal remarked, causing Eipha to chuckle. But a look from Elegast silenced them.

Unruffled, she continued. "Tell me—what is the prophecy of dark Illathurion?"

"She who was born to chaos shall give birth to chaos," Eipha uttered as if by rote. A look of puzzlement crossed his features. "I do not know where I heard that." He inquired of the others, but they hadn't either. "What does it have to do with the matter?"

"The coming blight will not leave Vitae untouched," Lady Braghlei warned portentously. "It will follow you. If Daughter has been blinded by the light and Son lost in the shadows, then only with you, Elegast, can there be any hope for balance. And that is a burden too heavy for most to bear. Outside this sphere is chaos. Do not think that because the Enemy is contained that they sleep. There are other ways for the galaxy to fall, more elusive than the fury of dragons and rage of the Old Ones. You would do well to return to the Circle of the Spirit. The Chosen One does not require your presence here to emerge. Until that time, I will not see any of you again…"

The Shamaness vanished, leaving all three disturbed by her words and the argument they'd had. Elegast was too old and wise to live as one blind. Mother was not of the Celestials and thus mortal, and while the Waters of Power and Knowledge would preserve alive the Ones, she could not drink of them, and even for Son and Daughter the waters held risks. But this meant that Mother would grow old and die, though much slower than she would in the realm outside Vitae. *This must be my test*, he thought, *as was prophesied long before. It must be to allow her the natural course of her life… to let her go… to let her die….*

The next day, telling Mother that he had a task he must attend to, Elegast journeyed to the moons of Iego and made inquiries. None had heard of her, and thankfully none of the Maelibi were known to have escaped in recent years, though they brought up the troubling possibility that she was a daughter of one that had not been accounted for. Other speculations were bandied about, the least disagreeable of which was that she was from an untainted branch of the Sephi. Whatever past she'd had, the answers would not be found with the Diathim. Finally, Elegast concluded that whoever she had been did not matter. All that mattered was who she was.

Seasons came and seasons went, and far too soon, Mother did grow old, and so too did she grow melancholy knowing that her family would grieve her when she passed. Yet a strange voice within her said that she was being abandoned, that Elegast *could* save her if he wished, *if* he did not cherish rules and regulations over her. She often ignored these voices, but as she grew older, they grew louder and more insistent, and she began to pay them more heed.

It cannot be stated for a certainty what might have occurred had Father bestowed immortality upon her as Son and Daughter had pleaded with him to do, insisting that she was special, unique, and *meant* to be one of them. *Perhaps the course of wisdom is to allow her to drink and stand beside us,* Elegast considered. *Is she not my wife and their adopted Mother? Surely, if an exception were to be made, this is the case.*

Yet, for all his intense and heartfelt affection for her, Elegast was a keeper of the law, not a breaker of it, not even in so grievous a situation as this. And always the prophecy was in his mind. In the end, though it distressed him greatly, he chose to not risk breaking the law, even to prolong the life of his beloved.

Eipha never forgave him for this and would henceforth accuse Elegast of choosing law over love—and this fed the brooding despondency within him. Niphal also held it against Father, judging him less wise and compassionate than she had thought him to be—than *she* would have been—and this fed the lofty arrogance within her.

Mother continued to age until, one day, when the acrimony between Son and Daughter grew so extirpative it shook the very foundations of Vitae, the voices in her head urged her to take matters into her own hands. If Father could not save her, she must save herself for their sakes. *After all, how can he carry on these weighty burdens without me? How will any of them maintain balance if I am not here to help them?* So, while the Ones fought, she snuck off to drink.

Father will be upset at first, but after that he will be grateful that I took charge of my own fate so that he did not have to make so terrible a choice.

The water from the Font of Power was delicious beyond anything she'd previously tasted, sweet like the Tamarind Pod that grows only in the spring in the Whispering Arbor of Pelsanor. At once, it restored her youth and vigor. At the same time, it awoke something else in her—a great and wondrous strength that she'd never before known but which seemed somehow familiar.

But it was the bitter waters from the Pool of Knowledge that told her who she really was… *So this is why Elegast denied me! He must have intuited the truth… Was he keeping me enslaved in marriage, hoping I would never learn my legacy? Hoping I would grow old and die? Was this his mission? Was this the reason that the strange woman that they never spoke of had come?* She grew angry at the deception and plotting that must have gone on behind her back… but mainly, she felt hurt. Burning tears of grief and shame rolled down her cheeks. *How naïve I've been! How blind and trusting! Never again will I be the servant of a Celestial! It is* they *who must bow before* me*! But perhaps they did not know, or perhaps they were forced to do what they did not wish.* She yet loved them, and it occurred to her that maybe they were too afraid to go against the demands of their masters…

When Elegast arrived, he was wearied from having to again bifurcate Son and Daughter from each other and the baleful madness that more frequently took them. But when saw what she'd done, he froze as one stricken, turning colorless as the marble statues in the Gardens of Amytis. But then a thought occurred to him: *I did not break the law, and yet she drank. We can be together…* but he was arrested by the look she now bore. It was like one who'd first tasted great sorrow. He had never before seen it on her face… and in its expression was the glare of suspicion.

"Did you know who I am?" The very question pained her to express aloud, but she pressed on. "Did you deny me life to keep me from fulfilling my true destiny?"

"I did not," he answered calmly, noting the great relief that came over her face. "I fell in love with you in earnest, for which reason I asked you to be my wife."

"I am gladdened beyond words to know this!" She took a breath.

He wanted to leave the matter there. He wanted to walk with her, hand in hand, to the Whispering Arbor and tell her he was grateful for the decision she'd made. Instead, what he said was: "Who do you say you are?"

"I have learned what has been hidden from me for these long years," she said, unable to curtail the fear and doubt assailing her but feeling more hopeful than she had

earlier. "I have seen the truth of the Celestials… If it is as you say, then you will not object when I take my rightful place." It was said gently but was clearly a test—and one she fervently hoped he'd pass.

"I am afraid I do not understand," he acknowledged. "Is not your rightful place by my side?" For some reason, he felt more frightened than at any time in his life…

"You ask this in ignorance, and so I forgive you… My name is Belot, Daughter of the Great Architect Tilotny, who is Queen of Air and Darkness, worshipped throughout the ages as the Goddess and by a host of other names. In the death throes of my poor Mother—condemned by a Celestial—the spirit of Tilotny became imbued in me." Then smiling broadly, she declared: "*I* am the Chosen One you have been waiting for all these years, the prophesied one of old! I have come to succeed the Celestials as the Sovereign of the Stars."

She had said this with growing confidence. All the while, dread coursed through his body like a deathly spell of frost and ice. He had the sense to know it would be catastrophic if he exposed the horror and dismay he felt, and he fought to recover his equilibrium as he said, "I knew of your mother… and her siblings. *Fascinating* beings! What *else* do you know of her?" He asked this to stall for time and to see how much she recalled.

"There is much that has not yet been revealed to me," she responded, deep in thought. She felt consoled now that she knew her family hadn't plotted against her but merely acted out of ignorance. Still, she would need their pledge, for she did not believe the remaining Celestials would readily give up power to her. "I know your people rejected her… one of them turned her into something hideous… her *father!* How awful! So *I too* am a Celestial! There is much I must learn and much to discuss before I stake my claim. From this time forward, the Waters of Wisdom and Power will be shared by us all. We will, at last, be a *true* family, and the galaxy will be made to learn balance…"

After Belot went off to drink more of the Waters of Knowledge and meditate on the received memories of her mother unfolding in her mind, Elegast regaled everything that had transpired to Eipha and Niphal.

"This is a *horrible* truth," Eipha stammered, deeply aggrieved. "Who can bear it?"

"I cannot… I will not believe it," Niphal said, tears pouring down her face. "The *daughter* of Tilotny! Surely, you must have misunderstood!"

Father's face was ashen. He had failed. The prophecy had come to pass. But he did not have the luxury to grieve, for there was too much yet to do. So he said the truth no one wanted to hear: "She told me herself after imbibing the Waters of the Fountain. She has become young again *and* powerful. She believes it is her birthright—as it was her mother's—to rule the galaxy! We *cannot* allow this."

"But what if it is?" Eipha said madly. "What if this *is* what the galaxy needs." Elegast and Niphal looked at him, but he seemed as crestfallen and lost as they. "Perhaps Tilotny *was* denied her birthright and Belot was brought forth to fulfill it. Perhaps that is why she ended up here so that we could show her the light that her mother did not know."

"Can it be?" Niphal wondered. "There is some sense in this. She *is* one of us."

"It is a comforting thought…" Elegast said at last, "as lies often are. I know only this: neither the Celestials nor the Elder Races were intended to rule as kings or gods. We do not take away free will, nor force others to obey under pain of death."

"I wish I were as certain of this as you, Father," Eipha admitted. "Much has been shattered since the Earliest Days. I am myself changed and do not feel now as I did then. It is not just the Humans that are unbalanced but nearly all of the galaxy. Perhaps it *is* a stronger hand that they need."

"I too am not as I once was," Niphal admitted, her eyes cast downward. "I venture that Mother's rule would not be any worse than our own attempts at maintaining balance have been… and might even be better."

"Have you so soon forgotten the Cosmic Wars, the third of which yet rages?" Elegast demanded. "That is what the sovereignty of Tilotny wrought! Belot herself believes that she is but a manifestation of the Architect, that her mother's spirit lives in her!"

"I have not forgotten," Eipha said softly, struggling with the magnitude of it all, "but I am at a loss and besotted with grief."

"If you are certain that that is the correct course," Niphal added. "I do not think I have it in my heart to carry out any harm against her. No matter what she has become, I love her still."

"As do I," Eipha added. "By what means do you intend to stop her?"

"We will not harm her, but we must leave…" Elegast's simple statement was met with blank stares. It was followed by denials and vain attempts to find another way. But in the end, they remembered the prophecy and all that Tilotny had unleashed. So at last they came to the realization that there was no other way.

After retrieving the Dagger and Altar, together they went to espy their Mother one last time, grateful that she was now asleep in the Pool of Knowledge. They grew alarmed at her appearance, which seemed altered for the worse. Niphal stifled tears. Eipha suffered stoicly. Elegast held out his hand, a symbolic gesture to the woman he'd wed. Yet, as their emotions had been too strong, Belot's eyes tore open!

Straightaway discerning what they intended, her expression contorted into a mask of rage as she floated up above the Pool. Her arms twitched as they elongated into tendrils, her form coming to resemble a misshapen mandrake with a wrinkled head and flambeaux orbs. "You would *betray* me!" she accused in a circean voice not her own.

"Quickly!" Father commanded, but Son had already pinned back her arms while Daughter cast a protective barrier to hold her. To their surprise, Belot tore through both and glided closer, tossing Eipha and Niphal back as if they were paper dolls. Elegast countered with an invisible hand that held her firm in its grasp, but she redirected the hand back at him, smacking him so hard he flew across the field and vanished in the tall grass. Son and Daughter turned to each other. With a mutual, near-imperceptible nod, they connected as they had in days of old, and struck out. But Belot had anticipated this, and with a burst of her trellising arm, she hurled the two upon the trunks of great pines which then bowed their boughs to raddle them in pinioned branches.

Elegast took advantage of the precious moments of distraction. He wrung from the churning earth and dragged from the sodden sky great chains of iron and spirit; weaving and encircling, they lashed forth to wrap around her quicker than she could stop them. And against these numinous bonds, she fought like a creature possessed.

As she struggled and failed against the trusses that bound her, she cried out in anguish and abject abasement. It broke him. *This is wrong*, he judged, *for no matter who her mother was and what spirit might dwell within her, Belot was but a mortal who had come to us without malice, having only ever shown love*. He began freeing her of the tormenting trammels when Niphal's call to aid refocused his efforts towards untangling her and Eipha. "I'm sorry," he said to her. He would never forget the haunted look of utter dismay that filled her eyes, for they were as the last light of dying stars. Then he was compelled by Son and Daughter to turn to run.

With great alacrity, the three hastened through the Interdimensional Gate to Oroboro. Elegast knew she had by now freed herself of the attenuated chains and so destroyed the gate behind him, weeping openly as he abandoned his beloved. This act pained him more than anything that had come before or would come later, and it was said that ever after, he bore the countenance of one weathered by too many years and wracked by too much grief.

Eipha and Niphal apprised the Killiks of all that had transpired. The Precursors wasted no time. With the knowledge that Belot was Tilotny's seed, they used Qolaraloq to move the stars and planets to create another sealed region, a hidden prison for her. Later, the Killiks would rename Belot in their tongue, "the Vain Evil One."

The Ones retreated to Mortis upon which they would know only regret. Though they tried their best to make their world an alluring one, it was never the same as Vitae, and always it felt empty and forlorn. "As Vitae was our home of love and life," Eipha intoned, "so is Mortis appropriately named, for it is our place of death and sorrow." The Celestials surrounded it with a protective monolith so that it could always move around the galaxy and never be found nor used again for evil, and the Dagger and Altar came to rest there for a time.

While yet she lived, Belot would never see her family again… The words Elegast had left for her, uttered in Pelsanor by a Whispering Pine, said only this: "We cannot express to you the depths of our sorrow at what we must now do in departing from before you, for we love you still and always will. But never could we consent to allow Tilotny—who opened the door for evil to enter the galaxy—or her seed into which you say her spirit resides, to lay claim to a realm we have sworn to protect. Forgive me. Perhaps one day, after the Restoration has come, we will see one other again."

For a long time afterwards, Belot wept as she listened to his voice before drinking again at the Font and the Pool, so that while her power increased, so too did these waters become saturated with grief and tainted by bitterness. Enervated by her own misery and trebled by the memories of her mother's betrayal and loss, she wandered bereft and alone in the Gardens of Amytis and despaired at the Whispering Arbor, but they whispered no more and she tended no longer the Dragonsblood and Camphor trees, and ever she strayed closer to the shores of madness until the day came when she met the one whom her mother had called "the Demon."

CHAPTER SIXTY-SEVEN

THE ANGUISH OF THE CHOSEN

SECTION I: CHRONICLES OF THE SHADOW WARS

In the grim days that came during the the Time of Whispers, which was marked by the reign of Bavmorda, Sorceress Magnific, when many were corrupted to her sinister cause, the wicked queen stood as one made of stone staring out from her accursed fortress of Nockmaar, envisioning the ways in which she'd expand her power from Andowyne to the stars. All she needed was a throne alongside the dark powers.

Queen Cherlindrea, Guardian of Andowyne and Sovereign of Greater Faery, trembled at the fall of one so great, one who had been chosen by Andowyne's very Air Elemental to serve as Messenger of the Skies to bring peace to the realm. But Bavmorda had proven to be self-seeking like her mother and, once corrupted by the Order of the Wyrm, brought horror and madness to the realm. Another would have to be chosen, one that might thwart the Demon Queen and her empire.

Cherlindrea had faith that a vision would present itself and confidence in her ability to interpret it, even if others did not. But that did not mean she didn't sometimes wonder if she'd been wrong. The presence of Humans on a Sacred World and the contamination they continually spilled upon it hadn't exactly endeared her to her fellow Valdilar. Of course, the Osiarch themselves had allowed Humans on Ravaath, so it wasn't as if there wasn't precedent. But that argument had swayed few.

Patiently, the Fairy Queen waited for the next vision, which brought both comfort and hope. A Chosen One would manifest as a child born of forbidden love. The child would be the Sacred Princess, blessed by the Weaver at the Loom and Those Who Dwell Beyond the Veil. The Great Mystery would ensure she was centered in the three Circles: of the World, Flesh, and Spirit. Within those conjoined Circles were the known Realms of Earth, Air, Water, and Fire, along with the less understood ones of Life, Death, Dreams, Despair, Precursors, Progeny, Humans, and the Fallen. The three darker realms had replaced those of Joy, Peace, and Wisdom, but only for a time… and what none could eradicate—though they could ignore and work against it—was Love, for this was not one of the Twelve Realms but a larger Circle invisibly surrounding the three Circles that were immutably dependent upon it.[188]

This child, Elora Danan, would very nearly go to her death, sacrificed as an infant in the Rite of Ultimate Oblivion by Bavmorda. Yet with the aid of the Nelwyn wizard, Willow Ufgood, and other companions, she brought to an end the tyranny of Bavmorda. So, the Time of Whispers came to its close… but it was only the start, for she was to set a pattern for the ways in which balance would be maintained until the coming Restoration and so would save not only Andowyne but the galaxy itself and all the realms that sprung off it.

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[188] See Appendix C.

A FORCE DEMON

For a long time Wutzek's heart dwelt in disgrace for all that he'd brought into the universe. Indeed, he had fulfilled the role of Key and Gate from which much had entered into their spheres by means of his offspring, though as a Guardian he had not done so well, and he thought upon all that was done in his name when the Enemy spread the myth that he was one of their kind, an Outer God. And when a form of his name was invoked in summoning, it was one of *they* who arrived guised in his form.

When he was defeated by Typhojem, he thought, *Here, at last, is the punishment for my foolish course*. When he was awoken from his dreamlike slumber, he was forced to confront the Night Queen, who had brought about the start of yet another galactic war. He hadn't relished the task, nor had it helped with the onerous remorse.

But he didn't remember any of that now. When he'd suddenly appeared on Andowyne, summoned by a powerful but mysterious dark agency, he was in a fugue state and confined by some obstruse force to the dungeons of Angwyn.

As a result, many thought the cruel vaults beneath the Royal Palace to be haunted by a demon, and perhaps they weren't far from the mark. He had come in touch with Chaos and was even now not far from it.

Cherlindrea had come to see him several times over the years. This visit would be her last. He was not much improved and still could not remember her.

"Who or *whatever* I am, set me free!" he raged in misery at his invisible bonds.

"You are no prisoner of mine," she reminded him. "Whatever binds you here, only you can set yourself free of it. Can you still not remember anything?"

"No, but you claim to know me! Tell me now, am I a Demon or otherwise?"

"With the fall of so many of the Valdilar, there are none of us who know anyone anymore," the Fairy Queen stated sadly. "What is the *Father of the Architects* if not a Demon? But perhaps I am wrong. It would not be the first time. From what I have gathered, you were summoned by Bavmorda during the Ritual of Oblivion, which was intended to sacrifice an innocent to bring forth a malevolent presence, but the spell went awry, and she instead sacrificed herself. Perhaps that brought a benevolent presence instead. Twelve years have passed since then, and the Rite of Ascension is neary ready to begin. Things on Andowyne will at last be set right once the Sacred Princess has ascended. I feel as if there is a part for you to play in all of this, but I cannot discern yet what that might be. I will see you again after the ceremony. Perhaps Elora will also help you to restore yourself."

It was not to be. On the Night of the Ascension, the one known as the Deceiver trapped Cherlindrea, her allies, and all the monarchs of the great domains in an enchantment of timeless rime.

Because Andowyne was a Sacred World, the World Gates fashioned by the Valdilar there were not subject to the eradication that met the Hypergates during the War of Temporal Planes. Bavmorda's ritual, intended to send the Chosen One to the Outer Darkness, flung open the World Gates across all of Andowyne. Had it succeeded, it next would have burst open the seals to allow the Eldritch Ones their much sought-after freedom. When it was thwarted and turned on Bavmorda herself, it did more than just bring Wutzek hitherward. It tore open all the World Gates, including those

on Hyperion and Apeiron—within each of which was *another* Andowyne and *another* Elora Danan who had taken *another* road.

This other Elora who'd made her way through the portal to Skyriver, unseen, scarred and weary, had known nought but misery, failure, and devastation. Powerful beyond reckoning and convinced that the ends justified the means, she took the form of Willow Ufgood, but to those who saw through her guise, they called her the Deceiver. Of her true form, none could have imagined, for only the Celestials knew of Apeiron and its fallen, embittered Chosen One.

This other-Elora brought forth the Cataclysm that stripped the great kingdoms of their magic and life, which she channeled into herself. It was but the start, for even the cruel and corrupt Malevoiy grew anxious when they saw that her intent was to eliminate from the world all magic, including theirs, and their desire to make the Sacred Princess their champion became for them a critical endeavor.

So the fight to save Andowyne began.

That was when Horliss-Horliss came to see his father.

His appearance was as a satyricon mirage in a mushroom grove. "Formless spirit… Who and what are you?" Wutzek asked, admiring the wavy coloured forms that danced before him. It was a novelty, at least, even if probably just another phantasm of his mind's making.

"Though your condition prevents you from recognizing me, know that I am your son."

"Are you one of those they call the Architects?" the dimly-glowing, globular mass that was Wutzek asked ominously.

"Not all your offspring turned to the shadow. I am titled Avatar of the Hourless."

"Was it *I* who turned them?"

"No, father. You are not responsible for all the galaxy's ills… though it was from anger, arrogance, imprudence, and impatience that you first spoke of killing us at the moment we were birthed, setting in motion the path pursued by my siblings."

"Then, it is true; those who call me a Soul Eater are correct! A Demon I am!"

"It matters not what others think. I have come not because of the past, but rather to show you the key to the future."

"Who would set one such as me free?" Wutzek asked mordantly.

"Evil cannot be defined by a few acts of foolishness in an otherwise benignant course. This condemnation is of your own making; you must set yourself free…"

Wutzek had heard this song before. He didn't believe it. "I have always been here. I will always be here…" The iridescent colors and wavy outline of Horliss-Horliss shifted and swayed like cumulonimbus clouds in a fading sunset. *A chromatic response to some inner emotion or external stimuli?* Wutzek wondered. "Fine," he said at last when this being refused to leave, "then give me this key that I might free myself."

"I have come to tell you that *you* are the key and the gate, the opener of the way."

"*Riddles!* Speak to me plainly, son of mine, if that's who you really are. What would you have me do?"

"I would have you *remember us*," and with that utterance, Wutzek recalled Tilotny, Horliss-Horliss, Cold Danda Sine, and Splendid Ap.

"I *remember*," he stated, "though all else is hazy still. Where are your siblings?"

"They have gone beyond, Father, but it is the past I now wish for you to recall, for it will aid you in unlocking yourself. It was fear of impotence that impelled your

daughter to seek to dominate all: you must let yourself be dominated. Fear of ineptitude impelled your son to know all: you must give away all that you know. Fear of chaos impelled your son to experience all: you must give away all that you are."

"*More* riddles…" Wutzek hissed impatiently.

"No, *not* riddles, father. It is a paradox and a principle for healing. To be free, you must hand over your freedom. The answers are within and without. Come soon, for you are needed. I will see you then." With that, Horliss-Horliss faded from before him.

Perhaps I only dreamed it. What chimerical hallucinations would Demons have but visions of other Demons? Still, this seemed more solid. And my endless dreaming has grown wearisome; I tire of playing the all-encompassing villain from a nameless mist lurking on the threshold, fathering monsters, and opening the gates to strange worlds. The lands of Dream had been sweet escape, but it is time to return to reality.

He stretched out to the world above, but all that he felt were the cruel brigands, suffering beasts, and teeming hordes. Nearer and dearer to him were the bones of the dead… and one whose body had long been preserved well past the time it should have mouldered to dust. It had never occurred to him until now to find out why.

DECEIVER FROM THE DUPLICATE DIMENSION

Despite his inability to see his own past, Wutzek was able to touch her well-kept body and see hers. Her name was Khory Bannefin, and a fierce and honorable knight had she been long ago, betrayed by a king to whom she'd sworn fealty, sacrificed to the perversions of the Malevoiy in exchange for their withdrawal back to their own realm.

Indignation and sympathy were not alien to Wutzek, but now he felt emotions he couldn't recollect he had: hope and determination. When a near-death Nelwyn enchanter was thrown into his prison a short time later, he knew it was no accident. The enchanter went by the alias Thorn Drumheller but was really Willow Ufgood, and a *Champion* for this Elora Danan that Cherlindrea had been so concerned with. Wutzek gave him succor. Now, he would do even more for the knight. *If* Willow would aid him.

The aid of the enchanter came reluctantly and against the advice of his Brownies, as they called the annoying Patitite here. Wutzek poured out his essence into the preserved body of Khory Bannefin, giving his life to hers. Ufgood had grave misgivings about this and was not shy about saying so: "No good can come from trafficking with a Demon!" But this Demon was no Demon… and *the knight was resurrected!*

Wutzek had expected to die, *again*, but instead he was restored. *Khory Bannefin is the first of my new children. She is confused now, as my own ravelled mind had been, but that will pass. She is to be another Companion of the Chosen One. But why this dead woman and not one of the living? And why was I tasked to this role? There is a purpose to all of this, but I cannot unravel it. Along strange path does the Maker move.*

He now recalled his entire past and knew at last that he was not the cause of death and evil in the galaxy. As Cherlindrea and Horliss-Horliss had told him, he had but to break the chains binding him so that he might ascend once more to the Unseen Realm, and there, in that that great empyreal abode in which he'd spent his earliest years, he received further healing and strength from the Source.

His was not the only sacrifice to be made on Andowyne. The Deceiver had by this time devastated Tir Asleen, Angwyn, and even the land that Cherlindrea had carved

out for the Veil Folk. To save Elora Danan, the great Star Dragons led by the Liege Lord of the Duinuogwuin, Calan Dineer, forfeited their lives. These events forced the Sacred Princess to grow up fast and learn from her companions, Willow, Bannefin, the irascible Brownies, Eagles, and many more who stood beside her in great trials.

Yet *still* did the Deceiver have the upper hand until it occurred to Elora to do the unthinkable, not for love of gain or power but for the greater good. This story, told elsewhere, has been relegated to legend, though it is not. It is the legacy of the Chosen Ones to know that the many ordeals that beset them empower them to defeat the darkness within and without by means of the light within and without. So did Elora obliterate accursed Nockmaar, restore the Realms of Andowyne to their great heights, and more amazing still, bring the Star Dragons back to life and glory.

What was not understood—by design so as not to be thwarted—was the ultimate purpose and paradox of these events, the pattern it set for the entire galaxy as a prophetic prototype… for in not destroying the other Elora Danan but embracing her instead, the dimensions became *intertwined*, no longer in competition with one seeking dominion of the other, but in harmony, and bound together with a *third* realm, for yet another Andowyne and Elora dwelt in Hyperion, progressing along her own path to bring deliverance; each path different in many respects and similar in others, but all three working in tandem towards a single goal: the eradication of evil. So in microcosm does the macrocosm unfold; the prophecy, already fulfilled, comes to pass; the secret known to so few, dismissed by so many, revealed in its ending.

DEATH OF A DARITHA

Wutzek returned to the Skyriver Galaxy no longer weighed down by guilt and shame but as an Avenging Angel. While pursuing the Hives of Soros, his thoughts turned to irony. It never ceased to amaze him that as powerful as the Celestials were, they could sometimes be outsmarted by the younger races, a fact that was no doubt meant to keep them humble. Several of his kind resented that and sought to rule them—the same arrogance and self-aggrandizement that brought so many to ruin.

Stalking and trapping his quarry who'd been driven from Kuna's Tail, Wutzek peered into what was left of Daritha Soros' mind and heart and found nothing but corrosion, a persistent and overpowering intent to do harm. This was an irrevocable evil that came from the hybrid's will and could not be healed or purged. Upon seeing the towering Emissary of Lights in the seconds before his death, Soros used his diabolic magic to transfer his spirit into his holocron. But Wutzek made what was the equivalent of a shrug and said, "A final bad decision." The Night Herald's acolytes would bury his body and holocron in stone within the ossuary-crypts of Sarafur.[189]

Heartily welcomed back by Horliss-Horliss, Wutzek and his offspring soared forth to eliminate any remnants of the Old Ones they could find in the galaxy before departing to oversee events in the vast dimensions of Hyperion and Apeiron.

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[189] The false tomb of Naga Sadow on Korriban, converted from the unused tomb of Ku'ar Danar, contains bas-reliefs that portray the peculiar stars of the Moddell sector, Kuna's Tail, Eye, Tooth, Fist, and Horn as the ossified body of an obscene insectoid deity.

SECTION II: OUTCASTS FROM THE SHADOW WORLDS

JENTAWUI AND THE DREAMWORLD OF AENIR

The Army of Light hunted the Sith operating outside of the Forbidden Regions, routing what wicked wizards they could from them so that they were locked back in their numinous prisons. The Sith were in great numbers then. Not all were found, but of those that were, most were forced to withdraw into two primary pockets: the Esstran sector, where they were resealed in the Stygian Caldera, and the Nihil Retreat in the Unknown Regions where the Celestials sealed Rhand and the surrounding worlds that had been expelled from the Dreighton Nebula and relocated by them.

Within the Red Nebula, the Sith spread across the legendary Shadow Worlds, with holdings spiraling outwards from Gunninga and Valtaullu to the Dark Worlds of Rennek, Durace, Veroleem, Valldon, and Thallarna. Sith worlds were far from monocultural. Wildly different customs emerged across different civilizations that followed diverse and unusual trajectories. Some, like Jentawui, had evolved into strange, experimental societies that barely resembled the Sith of old, and these were content to continue on their singular paths. Other worlds saw constant opposing factions and warring tribes steadily disintegrate their societies. A few underwent technological leaps that, in draconian societies, empowered their rulers to monitor their citizens to reward conformity to the whims of the current sovereigns and punish dissension.

On Jentawui, otherwise known as the Dark World, the Jentarajahs had designed their massive Castle of the Seven Towers on the esoteric formulae of their ancient Sith forebears. The Jentarajahs were the patriarchal rulers of the Jentawui, who were the Human descendants of the Vault of the Sea's mystery cult, and they were about to see their unassailable power challenged.

When the Jentarajahs addressed the nation at this time, they declared them indolent, weak, and permissive. To regain their lost cultural heritage and become strong like the Sith of old, they would revive the tradition of child sacrifice—a necessity for procuring Shadowguards for their elite youngling warriors. But in this, they went a step too far. The female tribes banded together with others who'd always detested the cruel policies of the Jentarajahs and strove to tear down their seat of power.

Things did not go well for the resisters at first. It was at this time that Shaeli, a young and spirited woman from the underclass, found herself on an unexpected adventure alongside the reserved and thoughtful Liam of the Vill clan. Leading them both was Leesi, a defiant elder warrior of the Nuva tribe who'd covertly secured a map and legend to a source of power she believed would solve all their problems.

Although Shaeli and Liam doubted Lessi's power source existed, their people were running out of options, and her conviction persuaded them to see things through.

The division and mistrust that existed between clans had been exacerbated by a cabalistic patriarchy who knew that by amplifying their differences, they would be kept from uniting and opposing their authority. This tactic had worked for centuries. So it was with fits and starts that the three companions learned to put aside their

disagreements long enough to overcome the numerous trials they had to face, a journey that brought them at last to the mythical object itself, an odd and unusual thing had been hidden away by one of Nuva's tribe leaders.

The Codex was a living revelation yet in its infancy and one of the few fragmented crystal remnants of Hidden Pithem. But Leesi had paid attention to her elders, and she knew what to do. To her companions' horror, she spoke to it, informing the Codex that thirteen of their evil rulers had to be thwarted, else they would begin to ritually murder children. To their greater horror, the Codex spoke back!

"I am drawn to the plight of you youthful renegades and that of your beleaguered world. What you need can be found in a realm from which grows an abundance of crystals. These will augment you inherent powers and allow you to overthrow the hateful Jentarajahs!" But the Codex warned, "This place is known as the Dreamworld of Aenir. It was once the domain of the one you know as Kopa Khan. It is a dangerous domain of exceedingly bizarre organisms, phantasmic beings, and malevolent shapeshifters that would break through if they could. It would be difficult and unwise to travel there directly, for portals and rifts to other dimensions can be deceptive, often leading travelers to regions from which only the damned return. I have another way, but you must suspend your doubt, anger, and fear…"

For the Jentafolk, that would be no easy task, and they argued hotly on the subject. In the end, they realized their mission was too important to allow for failure. Once they agreed to do their best, he continued, "Because the realm is an annex of the Dreamlands, I can transport your *spirits* there while your bodies remain here on Jentawui. I call it the *Way to Aenir*. But this process is new to me. You must be receptive and relaxed. Any negative emotions could end in disaster for you!"

"How are we supposed to relax after hearing *that*?" Leesi complained, but in her heart, she knew she would be fine. She thought the other two were another matter, and said as much, but they declared that they were resolved in their convictions.

The journey to Aenir was bizarre enough but nowhere near as outlandish as the place itself. The Jentafolk went through several startling escapades before they discovered the powerful Sunstone gems that grew like plants and shone like tiny suns. These were the product of Kedavra, which Sine had long ago taken from Arbra for Aenir. Immediately on grasping them, the travelers felt an infusion of power and knew that the use of these would be the great equalizer.

After returning to Jentawui, the Codex explained: "The gems can be utilized by anyone, including your adversaries, so guard them well. Their true effectiveness is based on the developing skills of each individual. As the wielder trains and grows, so will this be indicated by a change in the Sunstone's color, which will ascend through the rainbow spectrum from red, as you see it now, to orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet, which is the rarest and most powerful. Additionally, you will no longer need me to transport you; you who know the Way to Aenir can show others."

Thanking the Codex and putting him in a safe place of his choosing, the three companions returned to their respective tribes to distribute the Sunstones and inform the rebel leaders of all that had transpired.

The tide of the war changed after this, ending the wicked reign (and lives) of the Jentarajahs. No longer would male Rajahs dominate over subservient and feuding female tribes. Jentawui would be ruled by a Triumvirate of the Elect made from the best representatives of three different houses, to be known as Maiden, Warrior, and Crone—and Shaeli, Liam, and Leesi, who'd forever changed life on Jentawui, were appointed the head position of each. Henceforth, all who could show potential would train with the use of the Sunstones. With their developing abilities, society would be improved for all and protected from external forces. Yet, despite all the progress they'd made, pressure from one of the foremost tribes demanded that *some* of the old traditions be continued, albeit in a less injurious manner, and this led to a newly ordained Underfolk made up of those who seemed to have no aptitude at all.

The Triumvirate of the Elect also came up with an alternative to the Shadowguard tradition. During subsequent trips to that oneiric dimension, it was discovered that the lesser creatures of Aenir, if mystically bound to an individual, could cross back with them to Jentawui. These could serve the same purpose as the erstwhile Shadowguards. As a result, excursions to Aenir became a matter of course, and on annual pilgrimages, older graduates would release their Shadowguards back to Aenir before taking even stronger creatures of that realm for use as Spiritshadows.

Consequently, the warnings of the Codex in regard to the malevolent entities that dwelt there went unheeded, and so the the *Way to Aenir* was used to bring darker entities through. Ancient, imprisoned Doppelgängers now found their means of escape. Taking on semi-physical forms, they offered themselves to the Jentafolk to serve as Spiritshadows. This was readily accepted, and after gaining a foothold into the Castle of the Seven Towers, war for dominance of their world would soon begin.

Of the creatures that escaped Aenir into the galaxy during this period, there were the Halkra, Cha'wen'he, Quarf, Ee, and others. Some passed into Oneirichor, for they were creatures of Dream, though some belonged to the Darkness, such as the Croke.[190]

Unlike the Shadowguards and Spiritshadows—who were bound to their individuals and could function well enough under the artificial light of the Sunstones—the Doppelgängers required the sun for their shadow-selves to manifest form, and so they were powerless at night. This initially gave the Jentafolk an advantage, but it was lost when the Doppelgängers became adept at hiding in the evening hours. The Jentafolk were unwilling to accept the defeat that was fast encroaching. This drove the Triumvirate of the Elect to adopt a radical solution, one reluctantly suggested by the Codex who knew of an incident in history when this had been attempted.

The Elect merged their gifts with the most powerful of the Jentafolk and erected a magical barrier to Jentawui's sun—a veil to cover their world that left only the topmost peaks of their colossal Castle's towers extending beyond it, putting the inhabitants of Jentawui in a truly Dark World of perpetual night and cold.

[190] It is no coincidence that shortly after this time, the bizarre Book of Boolmide was written and the secret Gates of Grontessiant were constructed by the Skakoan Elders, who sought access to these hidden places, for the Lord Being, who was the Prince of Stars, had whispered magnificent stories of them in their dreams.

Only with the wisdom of the Codex were they not caught unawares when the changes came. The waters of Jentawui froze over. Their homes, whether on the sea or within the castle, was now warmed and lit only by the power of the thousands of Sunstones they'd harvested in abundance on Aenir. This drove the enervated Doppelgängers back to Aenir. The war was won, though it had come at a steep price.

Upon their victory, the Jentafolk cast an enchantment of *oblitum* upon all the creatures in that realm so that they would not continue to try to break through the Veil. Once accomplished, they then set a prohibition against the acquisition of new creatures from Aenir. But once again, these decisions came with opposition.

Conspiring in secret, those who longed for the old ways plotted with those who wished to continue acquiring Aenirans, and together they succeeded in a coup that drove the Triumvirate of the Elect and their allies from the Castle to the great barges that had been brought forth to plumb the icy waters for food.

The political structure within the Castle was reorganized into a caste system under an Emperor or Empress. As told in other chronicles, this led to the coming of a particularly powerful Doppelgänger in Sharakurr. But it also led to the rise of the Icecarl warrior Milla and a young Jentafolk named Tal, who would go on many adventures to try and rid the Dark World of the servants of evil.

THE DARK CITY OF THE CROKE

The telepathic Croke were at the peak of their power at this time and could cast invidious illusions. By means of the Black Lodge, some had earlier found their way to Terra I, while those who'd escaped Aenir established Crakull as the center of their technocratic government and soon enough took the entire sector that is now known as the Croke Reach and with it many slaves. But in the galaxy at large, they were known as the suspicious but harmless Muktian. All the while, the invertebrate, hive-minded horrors plotted and murmured of eldritch gods and the captious peoples known as the Human race. *What is it about this race that makes them so different from others? So special to the gods? So beloved and detested by so many?* They endeavored to study this thing called the *soul* that they often heard spoken of as endemic to Humans. They would learn its secrets, exploit it for their own gains, and then snuff it out forever!

Abducting Humans did not prove difficult, nor had manipulating them or utilizing powerful drugs to give them false memories. Their subjects were placed upon an engineered city-ship they'd constructed on Crakull which they could telekinetically reconfigure to mimic the Human world as it had been in better times. As *Strangers*, the Crakull Mages would only observe at first, their ashen, multilegged bodies hidden within bald, black-cloaked Human forms…

But try as they might, they could not find the soul. Some would have said it was never there, but their tests showed that *some* elusive animus existed. And so the search went on until, in a single day, one Human subject mysteriously developed the powers they thought only they possessed and learned their true nature. Despite their various attempts to snuff him out, he destroyed all that they'd accomplished and

many of their people! If, indeed, providence was the answer to the Human mystery, the remaining Crakull Mages were no longer interested.

Now, they sought out the approval of the Outer Gods. And for this, sacrifices would have to be made—seven Human hearts for each of their feculent gods must be procured once every decade! To ensure they were not unduly disturbed by odious Diathim and any pesky Humans trained to watch and protect, they returned to Terra I as gentlemen of the night, floating into the homes of their sleeping victims under a potent spell of silence.

Ever seeking to be the favorites of their hideous masters, the Croke went to infiltrate the jealously guarded Sanctorium of Mages on Eibon where the Warlocks of Iqqua had arrogantly begun to think of themselves as chosen of the gods. The Crakull Mages took on their shapes, learned their secrets, and slaughtered them one sorcerer at a time until all the Warlocks of Iqqua were Croke. In this way would they strengthen the ties that had begun to fray between the masters and their servants, and prepare the way for the eventual ascension of the Immortal Gods. It would not be the last time they would eliminate potential rivals, though it would take the maneuvering of Rokur Gepta to convince Emperor Palpatine that the Tund were an existential threat to him and decree their eradication, which Gepta gladly did on his behalf.

THE SINISTER STATUE OF KORMAN LAO

The reptilian Valtaullu fought and won a religious war against Maungur slavers. Horliss-Horliss had earlier exiled both of these truculent races to the Unknown Regions. To the victors went the prize, and the Maungur became slaves to the Valtaullu. Thereupon, the Valtaullu named their new planet after themselves. Ironically, their own name would once again change. Defiant for having been driven from Liskot, their tenebrific homeworld (now known as the MZX32905) in the Kanz sector, they thereafter referred to themselves as the Kanzer Exiles.

The Maungur were a monstrous corruption of the Rishii peoples of Rishi, and very much unlike the nomadic Truishii, who were a sister race of the Rishii. In response to the victory of the Kanzer Exiles, Maungur abroad adopted their predatory behavior. To keep these more aggressive Maungur from now harassing them, the Rishii tricked them. Pretending to be the divine attendants of the Goddess, they managed to get the Maungur to pay heed to them. Though the ruse worked, getting the Maungur to move to the polar regions, it didn't stop them from continuing to indulge in their wicked practices, including that of child sacrifice and consumption. This was put to a decisive end when Wutzek came and removed their sapience, turning them into beasts. Ironically, centuries hence, the Rishii would consider them a sacred part of their religious worship.

Anon, Wutzek sent a warning to the Maungur who'd conquered Ereesus—and called themselves Ereesi—that their activities had best cease lest they suffer the same fate or worse. The Ereesi remained quiet for a few years before returning to their profitable slaving enterprise. Retribution came when they pushed the enslaved Argazdan too far and they fought back. By the time their revolution was over, the Argazdan had killed every last Ereesi male, female, and child.

Back on Valtaullu, meanwhile, the planet-wide Temple of Korman Lao was spreading, constructed in part by the Star Forge of the Gunninga Gap and the Maungur slaves who were put to work erecting a titanic statue in honor of the Valtaullu's fallen hero and king, the Lord Ravager Korman Lao.

Even from its earliest beginnings, frightened rumors and evil happenstance surrounded that ghastly idol. It was discovered in extant fragments of the *Canticles of Aiden*, the work of a Sith Missionary from Rhand who'd visited Valtaullu to ensure strict allegiance to the Ancient Ones, that the face of the statue that hypnotically stared out at the stars bore no resemblance to the features of Korman Lao, but rather to an ancient depiction of Bogan himself: a lion-headed deity from darkest antiquity. One arm held up a key; the other wielded a sword; a serpent lay coiled around his muscular Human-like body with its ghastly head raised atop the malevolent lionine crown. Aiden's text claimed that this very spirit had come to dwell within the statue itself, for which reason a fiery glow could be seen within its orbs on some nights, though no flame had been alit.

While much galactic gossip is exaggeration and falsehood, this tale held more than a few kernels of truth, as there were two troubling facts about it. The first is that a duplicate planet-wide temple and statue had been seen and reported by Eipha on one of the Charnel Worlds that was called the Temple of Aion. The second is that all who dwelt beneath the shadow of the gigantic abomination—the Maungur and lower classes of Valtaullu society—came to be slowly and horribly drained of life.

Related to this is the widespread report that the Kanzer Exiles grew more evil and strange as the years went by. Always the statue of Korman Lao dominated their waking dreams, instructing them to increase their brutal sacrifices and forge dark alliances.

After the Taarakian Defenders fought and won a heated skirmish against the vengeful Warriors of Umlaa, their spiritually-poisoned sisters, the Warriors of Umlaa—realizing that they could not win at this time—took their people to Darkknell.

From the union of the Knell of Muspilli with the Kanzer Exiles, the baneful Sith Ankath, the dark Sephi of Xaczhick, and the Warriors of Umlaa, who now appropriated the Warriors of Shadow name, came the most malevolent of those who openly worship the gods of death and darkness. They are today known as the Sorcerers of Rhand.

Spiraling madness and agonizing dread are the Lich Lords who rule over the Sorcerers of Rhand as they chant the *abjuration of light* and frantically plumb the iniquitous scrolls, anxious for the release of the Ancient and Immortal Gods of the Sith and awakening of the Great Old Ones.

"All must be summoned!" croaked the skeleton-thing that was Imperator Eldon Isolde, who ruled at this time. "All must be released, for together they will bring forth the end of all things!"

To his most debased and repugnant fruit of nihilistic magic came forth through the Valtaullu Rift things fouler than they had before seen, with red, black, and yellow eyes surrounded in shadowy tendrils, forgotten, loathsome things crawling out of lonesome depths. It was but the beginning of their summonings, and it is said that, in this, the statue of Korman Lao began to wear a hideous grin….

A VAST CANCER SPREAD BY LIES

The horrors of the Twilight Wars had, for the first time, weakened the prison that held Belot captive, but it was the antemundane activities of the Sorcerers of Rhand that broke it… She kept her escape secret, having learned stealth in her long years confined on Vitae. Invisibly she roamed the spheres, ruthlessly seeking out ways in which to vent her wrath, for Belot's heart was then consumed by hate, while her mind was riddled with twisted and desperate thoughts. Yet, she was the Daughter of Tilotny—some said Tilotny reborn—and she was nothing if not cunning.

From afar, she heard the revolting whispers of the Sorcerers of Rhand. Soon enough, she'd discover if they were as clever as they thought themselves to be and worthy to serve her alongside the armies she would now gather. There were yet others vying for power in this vast expanse, and upon them she would keep a vigil.

The Rakata had reemerged on the fringes of the galaxy with a divers host of deadly weapons and warriors powered by the Dark Side. In the Parliament of the Precursors, the Gree's longstanding resentment of the Kwa spilled forth in accusations of having either purposely taught the Rakata how to hone their powers or shown such gross imprudence that they no longer warranted fellowship amongst them.

So deeply offended were the Kwa by these charges that they, in turn, accused the Gree of having done little to assist the Elder Races in the prior wars—save to hide behind their sidereal walls while the pandemonium of Illathurion poured out and scoured the galaxy. This only led to further accusations of the Kwa having assisted StarCrow in the Empyrean Wars, and so it went back and forth like this.

This conflict might have remained within the confines of their respective domains to become a mere footnote in history but for those voices behind the scenes… voices of hatred and division that sought to escalate matters into seething resentment.

Unbeknownst to any at this time, the governance of the Gree and Kwa had been infiltrated by an umbra of imposters who'd killed the embittered originals and shuffled into their bodies. When they spoke, it was with the voice of suspicion, outrage, and vitriolic accusation, exploiting old grievances in order to turn one against the other, baiting, riling, and escalating matters until—to the shock of the Firstborn and their own people—the Kwa and Gree declared war on each other.

Nothing anyone could say, not even the Ones, would deter them from this course. Aggrieved to see the Kwa and Gree embroil themselves in so grievous a course, the Parliament of the Precursors expelled both, hoping to bring them to their senses. But the conflict only escalated when old alliances were called in to take sides. So came the unspeakable events of the Precursor Wars.

Into the fray stepped one who ascertained that both sides should do whatever it took to win the war. She first appeared to the Grandmaster Council on Gree as a beautiful and alluring "Celestial Empress," offering to take care of their Kwa problem for them if they would but show her a sign of fealty. "Nothing else will be demanded," she assured them. "I merely wish to see the Kwa punished for their misdeeds." When asked what sign was required, she said they must bring the Kwa Patriarchs before her and kill them. The Gree Grandmasters scoffed, not at the act itself, but at

the slim possibility of successfully abducting the Patriarchs from their own world. But the Empress promised to send a powerful spirit to guide them to their victory.

This was not entirely to the liking of the Gree, but as the war was not going in their favor, and they felt limited in their choices, they prepared a team.

After this, the Celestial Empress then appeared on Dathomir and made the same offer to the Kwa Patriarchs, promising to take care of their Gree problem if they would but kill the Grandmasters before her.

Both sides might have rethought their actions had it not been for the mordant voices that strove to convince the majority that the other side was engaged in a massive deception campaign intended to stall for time so that they could strike first.

Under the cover of night, the Gree guerrilla force arrived on Dathomir. The Empress proved true to her word. A frightful spirit now passed before them, slaughtering guards and anyone else who stood in their way. Like a cloud of death they entered into the exotic homes of the Kwa Patriarchs and took them from their beds.

Returning to Gree, they brought their prisoners before the Empress. The Kwa Patriarchs knew that they were doomed, but before they were executed, they informed their erstwhile colleagues of the provisions they'd made: "We had heard that you would come to Dathomir to do us harm. For this reason had we instructed our commandos to power our Infinity Gates. In a few moments, you and this entire capital will lie in ruins. Perhaps it is fitting that we, Patriarchs and Grandmasters united only in our mutual hate, should pay the price of our sins together."

The Gree groaned as they looked out to the sky to see the speck growing larger as destruction drew nearer by the moment. Beside the gate on Urthha, who none knew of save the Osserians, the Kwa had the only Infinity Gate with destructive capabilities left. "You vowed never to use them!"

"And you vowed never to bring harm to your friends. Betrayers are we all…"

"It seems only *I* was true to my word," the Empress said, revealing her true form before vanishing. Only then did the Kwa and Gree see through the ruse and piece together the events, realizing that they'd been manipulated from the start.

The Dread Mother who'd long coveted Dathomir now returned to it, pleased to know that this Firstborn world would solely belong to her and her offspring.

Distraught by their actions, the Gree went into isolation. But the Kwa went two steps further. First, opening a passage, they invited the noble, Force-sensitive Humans from Kaldar I to serve on Dathomir as the Keepers of the Tho Yor. So was the Dread Mother thwarted for a time. Then, in penance and to ensure they'd never again harm another sapient being, the entire remnant of the Kwa gathered together atop the Great Blue Mountain, surrounded by the Great Blue Desert, and psychologically altered themselves into the simple, semi-sapient, lizardlike beings known as the Kwi (akin in appearance to the Rhoa Kwi), hopeful that their return would come at the galaxy's end in the Restoration of all things. Yet, although the Gree and Kwa would never take up arms again, their offspring were not so scrupulous and would war for many centuries after, divided into coalitions led by the Effogians and Groth.

CHAPTER SIXTY-EIGHT

BELOT, BRINGER OF CHAOS

STAR FORGES

The endless chanting and assiduous invocations of the Sorcerers of Rhand at last brought Belot before them. Materializing in an eerie blaze of fire and death in which several of the sorcerers, complaining they'd wanted something else, were stripped of whatever unnatural life they'd clung to, Belot hovered like a giant specter before Imperator Isolde, who stood his ground without trembling. "Great Goddess, you are… *unexpected* but welcome! We hope you have sated your anger."

"There is always room for more!" Belot replied with a twinkle in her terrifying eyes, but the Imperator only nodded in return, thinking, *At last comes one worthy of us!* "Since your incessant chirping has summoned me, your people will serve as the vanguard of my forces alongside three others. Who are the most powerful nations sealed in the Forbidden Regions with whom you will work?"

The Imperator named the Rakata, Korkodine, and Ko'Dai. Belot visited each in their captivity, enlightening them as to what was expected of them.

The Rakata were well known from the prior wars and their deception of the Kwa and were currently governed by a wicked overlord named King Eber, also known as the Smiter King, who was viewed as a god by his people.

The Korkodine Confederation was a potent crocodilian empire whose members, having mingled with some Gharial clans, were strong, agile, well-trained, and led now by the cunning pasha Roorat'Yhorn.

The Ko'Dai had spent much of the previous wars fighting amongst themselves or local systems. They were currently ruled by Rex Beh'Anihlus.

Belot's next task was to provide them the means by which they could construct weapons that could match the Engines of Defense and allow them to pass in and out of Forbidden Space. The Rakata had made the most progress in this area, having been granted the powered crystals that surrounded Turagranon (now Premont) by the Balmorden. A crossbreed of Hiitians and gundarks, the Balmorden had routed the Turagranians, an offshoot race of the Sephi and Kel Dor who fled in their giant, mollusk-like spacecraft, and taken the Turag crystals. Then, the Rakata defeated them and took the crystals for themselves.[191]

But at their current rate, her conquest would take centuries. So she tasked the three races to conscript slaves, amongst which were Humans, Devaronians, Tintinna, Mon Calamari, Nikto, Vodran, and others, and while Belot fashioned the interior

[191] The Turagranians would much later be known as the Nomads.

engines with the aid of the Turag crystals. The slaves were put to work constructing the shells based on detailed Rakatan plans that would house them. Once completed, these supernaturally-infused technological marvels would bypass the seals.

The massive orbital shipyards were known as the Star Forges, and they would bring terror to the galaxy for millennia.

The first of the Star Forges—tethered to the star of Abo, from which it drew energy—was overseen by the Korkodine and Black Rakata, who were the warrior caste. The Abo Star Forge transmuted stellar matter into metals and synthetic polymers for the manufacturing of droids and spaceships. Even more significantly, it aided in the production of the *Dar Tah Gensys*, which coterminously destroyed and terraformed target worlds, and the Teleporters, which were built on the principles of the Kwa's Infinity Gate and would allow individuals to traverse the galaxy at will.

The second Star Forge—tethered to the star Tulpaa and governed by the Sith and Red Rakata, who were made up of the Elders and priestly caste—transmuted stellar matter into biomolecules from which were built the sapient Mother Machine, called Ashaa, and the Mother Station, called Ishaa. These nefarious devices were named for Belot, who had infused part of her own sapience into them so that they could more efficiently do the job of transmogrifying slaves into hardier and potentially more useful armies akin to what the ancient Architects had made.

With the use of thaumaturgical gamma rays generated by Belot's abstruse essence, the Mother Machine and Mother Stations' xenoforming procedures brought forth the Flesh Raiders from hybrids of Rakatan and Massassi warriors; Zabrak from Sith and Devaronian genetic materials (from which later came the Elomin); the terrifying Zandozan from the Mon Calamari and Rakata, who served as bounty hunters and extermination emissaries; and Twi'leks from P'Chek and Human genetic materials.

But of all the bio-engineered races the xenoforming machines had produced, it was the Esh-kha who were regarded as their greatest success, for they bred quickly, had great strength, and possessed an unwavering propensity to violence. Naturally, the secret of their makeup was kept hidden by those who engineered them.

The third Star Forge—tethered to the black hole of the Gunninga Gap—was initially overseen by the Ko'dai with the aid of the mutated Flesh Raiders. The Gunninga Gap was suffused with a malignant and powerful life-force that the Rakatan device drew on to forge metal and biomatter as well as to achieve large-scale terraforming, cosmic engineering, and the creation of vast space habitats, including the legendary Ringworld of Omicron Dawn and lesser forges such as the Foundry of Nanth'ri and the Infinite Engines. It would be used to pierce the Red Nebula, allowing the Sorcerers of Rhand and the Ko'dai access out of the Forbidden Zones.

The Star Forges drew energy not only from celestial objects but from the Midichlorians of living things around them just as the Stone Temple had done long before, for the Star Forges were based on the same parasitic principle and would prove just as corrupting. With countless suns and slaves upon which to draw, as channeled through the Turag crystals, they initially bestowed an esoteric kind of power.

For the Korkodine, however, once they understood what it was that had been constructed, they would have nothing to do with them. Though the Korkodine had no

problem conquering, killing, and feeding on their enemies, having given in to what the Humans called their "naturalistic" urges (ironic, since it was Human predation and theft that led to these urges first coming to the surface), they saw the Star Forges as perversions of nature and a force of evil that repulsed them.

For the Rakata, the Star Forges were the culmination of their greatest desires, not merely because they were the most powerful of weapons and technology, but because they heightened their own Force abilities, making them feel greater than the Sith. That they were also stricken with madness in tandem with these increased abilities was, however, moot, for many of their leaders had already been mad.

For the Ko'Dai, the Star Forge altered their genetic structure, giving them near-invulnerable bodies. This would have been a great boon to them, but with it came mental languor and ennui, which was a fortunate development for the galaxy.

But the consequences of their existence went beyond the harm it caused to those who used and dwelt near to it. Within the Red Nebula, the three Star Forges produced what is known now as the Purple Void, a chasmal pocket of constantly shuffling stars, cimmerian planets, accursed nebulae, and baleful black holes.

To create chaos and divert the attention of the Ones, Belot set loose an offspring of the Kindred whom the Celestials had years earlier imprisoned. As it went about ravaging worlds in succession until at last it was sated and withdrew to sleep for a time upon a nameless planet, Athla'giroth, dubbed the World Razer, was a being the Sith were in awe of. But the armies of the Esh-kha kept a close eye on the Eater of Stars, as they called the entity, for they viewed it as a powerful god who might one day elevate their station and destroy their masters.

Belot's actions reignited the Twilight Wars that had been coming to a close. With the Celestials in other realms and the Ones weak and unbalanced, it was left to the Engines of Defense to repel Belot's forces, but they could not be everywhere.

So did the Sith arrive at their peak of power in which they possessed a disturbing cartographic spread across the galaxy while the Rakata moved to exact revenge on their most hated of ancient enemies.

THE MALIGNANT MYSTERY OF METAMURA

The Mother Machine roared into the skies of Tunit, easily defeating the shaken Kumumgah challengers. And from the abducted Kumumgah, Nikto, and Humans, the Mother Machine combined their genetic materials to create for the Rakata a servant race termed the Ghorfas. Ashaa then took the DNA of the Ghorfas and Tintinna and mixed them to generate a race of technicians from which came the Jawas.[192]

Terror gripped the harmless beasts subjected to Ashaa's hybridization experimentations that looked to generate hardy workers or aggressive creatures that could devastate their opponents, some of which were mixed with the genetic material of sapient races. From these came the Wraids, Sand Demons, Sandtuskers, Duneclaws, Sandswimmers,

[192] Ghorfas translates to "people of the chamber." Jawas simply means "indigenous people."

Howlers, Spitapillars, Scyks, Anoobas, Gotars (aka. Acid Lizards) and others, but far worse were those that had combined sapience with evil intent.

The Sand Demons proved stronger and more intelligent than their captors knew. Breaking free, they slaughtered the hated jailors and scientists and released the Kumumgah before escaping into the wild. In the melee that ensued, the Kumumgah joined with the Ghorfas and Jawas to overthrow the Rakatan occupiers in the Tunit capital of Kumuroon, allowing all the bio-engineered races of Ashaa to escape and steal Rakatan ships, from which they disappeared into the stars.

The now unfettered Devaronians dropped the Twi'lek population off on Ryloth, an out-of-the-way, unpeopled world with its polar axis perpendicular to its orbit. Proving themselves a noble people, they would not be forgotten. Five centuries later, a Tho Yor ship would arrive to bring the Force-sensitive amongst them to Tython.

Things might have ended differently than they did, for the Kumumgah had been counseled by those with cooler heads and sent warnings in dreams, but the warriors refused to let die their rage, and they rushed forth to kill every last Rakatan invader rather than suffer their presence a moment longer. When word reached the Predors that the Kumumgah were not only taking back Tunit but slaughtering all the Rakata they came upon, placing their heads on pikes which were arranged around each city they reclaimed, the Predors took the only option they knew.

Rather than face defeat and humiliation, they bombarded the Kumuroon capital whereupon the majority of the Kumumgah dwelt. So devastating was the barrage unleashed from the terrible *Dar Tah Gensys* that it began to transform Tunit into a sandy wasteland. Then, the few Kumumgah who survived orbital bombardment were hunted down and devoured by unleashed Arion, Jawenko, and giant Sarlaccs.

As Tunit grew ever more desertified in the years that followed, it became referred to instead as Fum Tatawin by the Ghorfas, which was shortened to Tatooine by the Jawas, and the latter is the name that endured. Other survivors included various fauna and colonists far enough away from the epicenter of the blast, though many of the former were of mutated strains.[193]

The Ghorfa people went on to build and enjoy a thriving civilization for long years, forging a cautious peace with their Human and Jawa neighbors. Ere it was called Desolation Canyon and the Lost City of the Ghorfas, it was known as Metamura, from which comes the name of the small city of Metameur that exists today. Although it is told in the history books that the Ghorfas turned savage and nomadic due to the Human settlers stealing their water—and there *had* been minor skirmishes with the settlers over water rights before boundaries were drawn and treaties signed—the truth doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of what really happened.

The transmuted creatures that had escaped proved a serious danger for the survivors, but as deadly as they were, none were more terrifying than the misshapen things that held the form of rats but were not. The inhabitants of Tunit were not disturbed by local fauna or even the common rat or *faybo* which some kept as pets, so

[193] Tunit meant "homestead" and "garden," while Fum Tatawin means "the smoking, hard shell."

they knew that these creatures were something altogether different. Some say they were named the *womp rats* based on the Ghorfa word for "revulsion," for they smelt of death and the foetid decay of the swamp, and scalts and other creatures would flee from their dens. Others claimed they were named for the disturbing sounds they made. Unlike the noises of standard rodents, the more one listened, these sounded like some horrible, guttural language.

And where other predators roamed or nested in secluded places far from the dwellings of Ghorfas, Jawas, and Man, womp rats stayed near to the domiciles of their prey, hunting with an intelligence that seemed on par with them but with a malevolence that exceeded all others. And after several incidents in which young children were snatched—their sad, small bodies later found in grisly states—a concerted effort was made to destroy the monsters.

In the purges that followed, many were killed, yet cyclically there surfaced rumors that some survived by means of a leader with glowing eyes and an impossible Human face, and over the years, stories would be heard of travelers who caught a glimpse of a hairy thing the size of a young Dewback with long, sharp teeth and ghastly, ignescent orbs. And often children would speak of nightmares of a horrible creature calling itself Eiten. The foul-smelling mutant would come to their windows at night, promising to return again one day to eat their parents while they slept before coming for them! Anon, the Ghorfas adopted the Massiffs as pets and guardians.

A generation passed. The city grew populous. The Ghorfas complained of treaty violations by the Human colonists and each side claimed the other polluted the water to drive them off. The controversy threatened to turn into war, for which reason the reported sightings of giant-sized rats were ignored. But the Massiffs would growl and scratch at the floors and walls, and often a noisome odor would be detected.

At first it was thought that Human colonists had attacked, but the shocking sight of hundreds of massive-sized rats dispelled them of that notion. A night of mayhem followed in which the very young and very old were taken, with only a few bodies recovered in partially-eaten states. That more damage wasn't done was on account of Ghorfas who fought like madman and the Massifs tearing at the red-eyed horrors.

Then they disappeared again, and another generation came and went.

The first sign of their return came at night with the sounds of rummaging and high-pitched chittering that went back and forth as if people were talking. This was followed by daytime sightings of large and dirty grey forms shuffling about in the most inappropriate of places accompanied by the fetid discovery of large excrement. It wasn't until the Massiffs came home bloodied and battered with the bodies of giant rodent-like things in their mouths that they knew *they* had come back.

Things escalated with the abduction of the younglings, some of which were later found in lightless lairs hidden behind walls and under floorboards with their juices sucked out like dry, shriveled mummies left behind for their grieving families to bury or burn… and once more the name of Eiten was spoken aloud.

This time, when a search party was organized to kill the womp rats, a tunnel was discovered, a foul-smelling dark hole located behind the rotting wall of one of the domiciles. But as they began to excavate it, they learned a terrible truth: the great

city of Metamura, of which they'd been so proud, was built above their lair. The womp rats merely expanded it over the years into a honeycomb of channels leading underground for none knew how far. With the choice of abandoning their city or doing away with the abominations once and for all, the latter course was decided upon, and one by one, the men of the city climbed down the narrow, evil-smelling passageway armed with torches, sharp farm utensils, and slugthrowers.

Days later, the desperate, terrified mothers and children who'd anxiously awaited their return watched as what crawled up the tunnel to greet them was not the brave men who'd gone down, but a shuffling, stinking mass of pulsing bodies and sharp teeth with gleaming eyes! They roiled forth with blood-and-offal-matted fur that squirmed and pushed their way up the entrance until the final sanity-shattering thing emerged, a great brown nightmare the size of a galoomp, its mouth dripping with the blood and gore of husbands and fathers. But worse than even that was its grin… *for it bore the face of a man!*

With only the clothes on their backs and children gripped tightly to their sides, the Ghorfa women leapt upon their banthas and fled in terror into the desert. Not until the suns fell and they'd traveled a long distance did they feel safe enough to dismount. Digging into their few supplies, they gathered together to make a decision as to who amongst them was wisest and hardiest enough to be declared leader. She who was chosen is remembered in stories only as the Matriarch.

The Matriarch reflected for a long time in solitude. After the fall of Kumuroon, her ancestors had chosen to live off the land, avoiding even Metamura, though they often visited it for trade. But they never stayed. Some of their fellow Ghorfas had scorned them for this, but they would only say that they had learned the lesson of the Builders and the truth of technology.

Now, that very lesson would save the Ghorfa remnant. Their city was lost to them forever. Nor would they beg the stingy Human clans as a few earlier had tried, only to be met with derision by those who gloated at their diminished state. Neither side had forgotten the water sources they had years earlier fought over, and though the Ghorfa knew now why the pools had turned foul and undrinkable and shuddered to recall it, they had not forgiven the farmers for their injustice, deceit, and cruelty over what by right had belonged to the natives of the planet.

"The Builders came," the Matriarch growled loud enough for every Ghorfa to hear. "Their machines irradiated our lands and dried up our oceans; their creatures drove us from civilization. We are bowed, but we will not be broken. We will survive the harsh desert sands. But to do so, we must become as the sands themselves—unyielding, pitiless, and countless. We will become People of the Sands—fighters, nomads, and conquerors. The massiffs and banthas will be our helpers; the hubba gourds, our primary food source; waterwells, our sacred spaces guarded from man and beast alike. Erelong, when we are strong and plentiful once more, we will spread out far across the lands until we cover the face of it!"

And so, from the survivors of horrors both above and below came the hundreds of tribes of Sandpeople, or Tusken Raiders as the Humans called them, that now range across the face of Tatooine; and though their traditions would vary from tribe to

tribe, their culture and basic way of life centered on the pragmatic needs of survival in the harsh desert. And it is because of the Sandpeople that the accursed line of Eiten was finally wiped out, leaving behind the less-intelligent, easily mutable workers who, without a master, were reduced to a vicious but common predator.

Eiten is known now only in stories of the past, but ever and anon there will arise whispers from foreign Tuskens living far out on the edges of the Western Dune Sea or south beyond Wayfar, and some would tell of a vast network of underground burrows that bear the scent of death, within which could be heard voices that rumbled. Then, once again, rumors would come on the wind of "mutant womprats," and nightmares would awaken the young, and tales would tell of unholy things in the shape of rats with great teeth, red eyes, and the horrible faces of Men…

MALEVOLENT MOTHERS & DEADLY DAUGHTERS

As with other harrowing implements of these times that were abandoned, hidden, or forgotten, the Mother Machine of Belsavis and the Mother Station of the Makatak system were cast aside when the Red Predors who'd helped develop them were defeated and humiliated by the Black Predors who sought to ensure their prestige would be untarnished by the success of those who formerly wielded power over them.

Sapient beings due to the infusion of Belot's personality matrix, these mechanical entities grew perturbed, lonely, and more malevolent over the years. The Mother Machine would eventually be rediscovered during the Cold War by Sith Inquisitor Lord Kallig, the future Darth Nox and descendant of Aloysius Kallig.

But the Mother Station yet waits, parched and mad, seeking one she can assimilate.

Belot may have ensured that their fate was otherwise but for a crucial error she'd made. Desperate to ensure that her traitorous family suffered, she looked to free their deadliest enemies, unaware of what that meant. Disregarding the inner voice that urged her not to do this, she sailed into the uncanny, treacherous, and noxious depths of the Gunninga Gap, following the sound of other strange voices that called to her out of that atramentous well.

When at last she arrived within the roiling mass of interred malignancy, she paused, reconsidering her course. These were not like the foul Rakata, nor the terrible ghasts that were the Starweirds, nor even the evil and tyrannous Lich Kings. Those which inhabited the unyielding darkness were like no others, older and considerably more sinister and far better at dissimulation and manipulation.

Deciding that she should have no traffic with such things, she turned to flee, only to find herself trapped within an enclosed sphere of absolute and unrelenting malice ringed by six shifting forms of blackest shadow.

So all-consuming was their foulness that it penetrated her very core. Belot knew rage and pain, but never before had she felt so thoroughly soiled and contaminated, and she despaired at ever being free of it.

"She looks much like her," a croaking voice uttered.

"Beautiful was she… beyond reckoning," said another, high-pitched and mocking.

"Clever, too," droned still another. "Or so she thought!"

Hateful laughter followed.

"My mother knew what you were," Belot said, faint memories now stirring within, as was intense revulsion and rising panic. "I will have no dealings with you. Be gone before me." She pushed out, attempting to hurl the eldritch shadows back.

"Powerful," one of them said with admiration.

"But still a child…" That voice came from none of the six but from the inky void beyond them.

"All the better!" another voice whispered luridly.

"Where is the Dagger?" a bottomless voice insisted.

"With the Ones whom none can find!" she finally replied, breaking her resolve.

"She does not know," another shadow revealed. "*Useless*… like her mother!"

"Another castoff," another voice added cruelly.

Belot slowly started to disintegrate.

"With no *one* to mourn her when she is gone," cackled a third.

"What do you want?" she demanded between silent screams as the corruption reached up from her extremities to her face and became unbearable like the consumption of fire.

"A small favor," one of the things with burning eyes intoned.

"A minor inconvenience for one such as you," echoed a black shadow.

"For which you will receive a rich reward."

"The means by which you will have your revenge."

"I cannot break the seals," she responded firmly, refusing to allow them the pleasure of seeing her suffer, "not even with the aid of the Star Forges."

"Ahhh, but *together*, we can!" an abysmal thing said.

"Join your power to us," a hollow voice followed. By now, she'd lost track of who was who as she began to feel darkness threatening to snuff out her consciousness.

"A mere crack of the window."

"Or you can let yourself die…"

"Forevermore…"

"Unmade."

The pain was unimaginable, and she felt she was near death. She had come to bring punishment to her family, not sacrifice her life for those who were far worse. But then a fleeting memory flashed of having defeated such things once before.

"Reveal yourselves!" she commanded with what strength she could muster.

Shapes appeared in the forms of horrid, winged forms with the heads of horned birds, beasts, and creeping things, but only for a moment. Then a black shadow with noctilucent, white eyes came forward to take her.

"*I reject you!*" she declared. "Death would be preferable to your marcescent embrace! What are you but horrid stains, corruptions of base and hoary things lower than the thallophytes! *I reject you*, noisome exudations of ordure! May your immurement be everlasting! May your desecrated thrones crumble to dust! *I reject you!*"

She said these things with all that she was, drawn from a force within her that was even greater than what the Font and Pool had earlier granted her. The taste of it was neither sweet nor bitter but pure and fierce. This was freedom and power. This was the immeasurable empery her majestic Mother, forged in the crucible, had known. Its triumph fed and strengthened her so that she grew in ways she hadn't imagined possible. In abandon, her wild spirit propelled outwards past the barrier and outstretched talons of the ancient, vile gods.

All turned to bright white. When she awoke again, she was alone in the wide expanse. *Because they are but feculent penumbras, they desperately seek to return to the lands of the living… yet they inspired multitudes and thwarted my mother's plans. They cannot ever be permitted to escape.*

Belot felt an intense longing to avenge herself on those nameless entities and descended into the Charnel Worlds where she saw the fruits of their labors, the disturbing embodiments of fever dreams and things that should not be. But as her feeling of revulsion had already peaked, she passed them by. What she did not feel was fear; she knew she was an Architect of a sort and that nothing could harm her, save perhaps the Dagger that was now with her former family on whatever world they'd chosen to hide upon. In the deepest depths of the lowest of the Nine Hells, she searched through the black and bottomless pit of the Outer Gods.

No answers would be found here, and she conceived of opening a rift and casting the Hellworlds and their masters out of the dimensional gate to wherever they'd first

come. Concentrating her power, she opened a black door with which to push them through. She was sure they felt the pull… She could feel it as well… but as she came to realize, things didn't work that way and they could not so easily be gotten rid of.

Her portal, open for only seconds before she'd realized the futility of the task, had an unintended consequence, providing the way for the arrival of something else, some *other* noxious nonentity entombed for so long it had forgotten who and what it was. It shambled towards her, curious about she who'd wielded such power; surely she belonged to him, as did all things; its tendrils reached out to touch…

The massive amount of energy she'd unleashed caught the attention of Wutzek, who now arrived as a a tower of light, a fierce and puissant blaze of iridescent globes that chased away the nameless, mad thing. Belot could barely tolerate the sunlit globes herself. Against a force such as this, few could stand, and this thought depressed and angered her. In a blink, Wutzek transported her back to her former prison. *It is almost a relief*, she thought, but that infuriated her too.

The Being of Light spoke. "For a long time, I had been imprisoned and did not know myself or the things I had done. Perhaps that was how I wished it. I do not know, but it was feeble and false. We must accept who we are and choose to do better. Do you know who you are?" he asked.

This rambling speech surprised her, but she understood him and felt the natural warmth he exuded. It was a refreshment after her prior encounters, but that did not mean she would let her guard down. This was a universe of many competing powers. "I am called Belot, beloved Daughter of the Great Queen and Goddess, Eternal Grace, Wife and Mother of the Family, betrayed and deceived by One for whom law was more important than love, One who concealed from me my rightful place."

"Yes, you are the offspring of Tilotny, the fruit of my seed whose deeds I had to forfend lest they bring chaos and suffering to untold innocents. Though I take responsibility for my part in this, the tragic outcome of error and grief would have multiplied by a thousandfold had she been permitted to roam free. You are much like her."

"So it is you who is responsible for her destruction?!"

"Her destruction was of her own making and a sacrifice to bring about *you*. But yes, I offered her a choice as I now offer you one: Come with me. Heal from the suffering that has wounded you. Join with your brothers and sisters in love…"

"I have known some already. I do not find your family so agreeable."

"Light and darkness often mingles so that *perfect* love is not to be found in this realm—but beyond it is a much larger world and the hope of something greater, for this is the promise of Restoration that the Father of Lights will bring."

She didn't know what to make of this talk which seemed so alien to her, but the sting of the Ones' betrayal was still felt, and she yet longed to make them suffer as she had. "The darkness I have unleashed is evidence that I am my Mother's Daughter. Why has death not taken me, if not by your own hand?"

"A promise I made to visit no harm upon you whom she loved. And you have not yet been consumed by evil." Wutzek pointed a finger at her form, within which she saw a kind of starlight mingled with a smoky void.

"You think it is *harmless* to confine me to a barren existence?"

Wutzek understood the great threat that Belot posed but was not without sympathy for her. "You need not be lonely here, for even this world is large and abundant with life. You are a Celestial being. Raise up companions for yourself from the beasts you find here. I think you'll find that if you choose the light of love, you will keep the madness at bay. I know of what I speak, for I have been mad as well."

"Such ones are bound to be better company than any I've found thus far."

But there was a deeper truth he wished her to know. "If your domain is torn open again, it will be because the galaxy has refused to learn from the mistakes of the past and plunged once more into war. If you choose to exploit that to your own advantage, as you had done, the destruction that follows will be on your head."

"That is a forgone conclusion, for the inhabitants of this cosmos will not be stopped. This I learned from my time on Vitae. They are filled of unreasoning fear, willful ignorance, depraved indifference, petty jealousy, insignificant pride, foolish pursuits, and bottomless greed. They follow the path of self-destruction."

"Then that is on *their* heads. But there is more to them than their deleterious traits. Surely you felt this too?"

"I have forgotten much of what is good, noble, splendid, or fragrant…"

"Such is the taint of the Ancient Ones upon you… the same taint that has seeped into the galaxy…"

"I yet feel their disease within me. It reeks of madness and rage, of hideous and hidden power, of thousands of dead worlds hovering in black space."

"Leave them to us," Wutzek stated. "Rest. Heal. There is more to life than suffering, death, and destruction. Remember what is good. You may yet prove to be a Bringer of Light rather than a Bringer of Chaos. You stand at a precipice. I would prefer that you came with me now, but I will not force your hand. If you see fit to do so, you need only call out to me, and I will come."

Belot would not go with him at this time, for the ancient pride that stirred in her heart was too strong, her resentment too powerful. Yet, she found that she did not hate this being. For all that he'd done, she could feel that he was at least honest and sincere in his wish to help, and that was more than she could say for most.

In her prison world of Vitae, she raised up beings to serve as companions, and this proved diverting for a time, for they were childlike, droll, and sweet. But daily did the memories of her family return to her, for her love for them had been intense, and no amount of friends could replace what she'd felt for Father, Son, and Daughter.

It is obsession, she realized and struggled to defeat it.

Time passed strangely in Vitae, but for the rest of the galaxy it would be long millennia later when she finally deigned to call upon Wutzek. She would go to his realm, meet these others. She would take her playful creatures with her, and indeed they looked forward to the adventure.

She called out. She waited. She called out again. *Can he not hear me from so far away?* The more time passed, the more she began to despair. *Perhaps it had all been a lie, a trick to make my suffering all the worse. Or perhaps he has given up on me? If he can see into the hearts of others, perhaps what he saw was the unfurling nightfall*

that I will bring. But maybe something else has occurred? Wutzek was defeated once before. Perhaps one of the Eldritch Powers had gotten to him.

In a way, these thoughts were far worse, for they convinced her that the galaxy was not a fair or just place, that there was no Supreme Maker who would set things right… only darkness and despair. She thought she'd conquered the spleen within, but all she could feel now was an consuming grief. Her companions tried to cheer her, but the black mood that consumed her soaked into them as well, and they became broken and twisted, weird poppets that stalked about, and mockeries of life.

If Wutzek cannot come, I must find a way to depart on my own. The galaxy was broken by the betrayers—Now I *will break* them *and remake the galaxy with my love!*

Though they'd been advancing and achieving victory upon victory, when their goddess failed to return, the Sorcerers of Rhand knew something had gone amiss. The Rakata attempted to usurp their position, but the arcane arts of the Sith brought them back under their heel, causing King Eber to smite himself during a public address after announcing that the Sith were their true kings under the new Infinite Empire.[194]

The Ko'Dai could not so easily be controlled or corralled. Having found that they had no taste for death and conquest, they simply declined to maintain the alliance. The Sith were accordingly disdainful of what they perceived as the "Ko'Dai Weakness," and with the combined forces of the Rakata, they ravaged their world, forcing them into exile on the hidden world of Gendai. Hereupon, they were known no longer as the Ko'Dai but the Gen'Dai.

The disappearance of Belot convinced the Korkodine Confederation that the Elder Gods had returned. Utilizing the rare Grand Teleporter, which they afterwards destroyed, they spread out into the galaxy; those who went to Essowyn became the Saurton; those who went to Abonshee became the Anointed People; those who fled to Davnar II became the Davnarians; those who settled on Chaaktil became the Cha'a; those who settled Rodis became the Rodisar. Lesser colonies on other worlds would be referred to by a variety of names: Loricates, Trogodiles, and Pocket Dragons. This dissemination proved wise, for though it cost them prestige and power, it preserved their lives and the lives of their offspring through the coming millennia.

Although ostensibly under Sith dominion, Rakatan wrights secretly ramped up the production of arms on Lehon. A millennium hence, the Esh-kha were slaves no more but a bloody coalition known as the Horde. Entire sectors were terrorized by their policy of extermination to all who would not be subjugated. A hive-society, violent in the extreme, the Esh-kha had been bred to be conquerors by the Rakata, wherefore their territory swelled to even more systems than that of the Infinite Empire, as most preferred to submit or flee rather than face destruction.

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[194] In their tongue, the Rakata referred to this as the *Nyashdarith*, the "Infinite" or "Eternal Empire," a limitless kingdom, temporally and physically. The True Sith also referred to their pre-Republic Empire as the *Nyâshdathk* or *Tsisnyâshdathk*, which bears obvious resemblance. Note that the words infinite, immortal, and eternal are interchangeable prefixes in the titulature of the Sith Emperor of Zakuul. The full historical and linguistic links between the Rakata, Sith, and Zakuul has yet to be uncovered.

Less known is the fact that not all the Esh-kha had given in to the ideology of domination and destruction embodied by the Horde. A remnant under the patriarch known as Hallow Voice broke off from the rest in order to espouse the way of peace. That these were the exceptions only served to prove the rule—the Esh-kha were not wholly evil, as most had been deceived and riled up by their rulers.

From the Rakata had the Esh-kha learned to lie, and the latter's claim to have gained dominion over half the galaxy was a patent untruth, but one that caused great fear to those they targeted. Yet, in spite of the short-term gains made using these tactics, their fanatical violence worked against them. When the Horde turned their attention to the encroachment of Sith territory, the Rakata took advantage and invited any beleaguered worlds to come under the protection of the *true* Infinite Empire. This was the very opportunity they needed to gain the upper hand on their Sith masters, and though the worlds that sought their aid were subsequently subjugated by them, for the people who received shelter under the Rakata, it was far preferable to death.

With their marriage of technology and sorcery fostering the creation of nigh-infinite fleets and droid armies, the Rakata turned the tide against the technologically inferior Horde. Yet the Esh-kha held one card in reserve for just such a time. Years earlier, they'd tracked down the fetid world upon which the Eater of Stars slept. Though it took numerous sacrifices of their own people to rouse Athla'giroth, the Esh-kha were successful. They would serve him as a god, bringing him an endless supply of victims from any who opposed them. He, in turn, would protect them in the event that they came upon a rival more powerful than they.

That time had come! the Destroyer of Worlds was sent to destroy first the Rakata and then the Sith! The Sorcerers of Rhand were pleased withal to see one of the Great Old Ones revealed, though they were not foolish enough to provoke him while he yet served the Horde, and they withdrew to their worlds in the Nihil Retreat where the Lich Kings began supplication spells to draw the entity into their service. It did not matter to them that the World Razer would devour the Rakata; that rebellious ally had outlived their usefulness. But the offspring of Ooradryl was another matter! Soon, this great entity would remember that its allegiance belonged to them!

Athla'giroth would have wiped out the entire Rakatan race had not Horliss-Horliss arrived then. The sudden appearance of the Avatar of the Hourless was even more terrifying than the World Razer to those who knew he could smite them with but a word. But rather than cause further bloodshed, he interned the dreaded Destroyer of Worlds on frozen Belsavis along with a hundred thousand surviving Esh-kha who'd been gearing up with a blood-fever to finish the job the Eater of Stars had started. Then, Horliss-Horliss opened a rift to the sealed worlds in the Unknown Regions, forcing the proud Rakata back to Lehon and the Sith to their sealed regions.

Millennia later, the Esh-kha would be released by the Sith of Vitiate's Empire. Several would try to free the World Razer while the rest embarked on a killing spree against Sith and Republic forces. But this time, the Esh-kha would lose all.

CHAPTER SIXTY-NINE

DARK KINGDOMS DIVIDED

SECTION I: AWAKEN THE GUARDIANS

In the midst of the Twilight Wars, in 36,453 BBY, the massive pyramidal ships of the Tho Yor were at last awakened. Seven had been dormant upon the most promising worlds the Gree and Kwa had earlier decided upon for this very purpose: Ando Prime, Kashyyyk, Dathomir, Ryloth, Manaan, Cathar, and Alpheridies. An eighth Tho Yor now left Tython, travelling the galaxy in secret to collect Force-sensitives from the hundreds of systems that had been tested by the Kab-Ell. This vessel also went to Atrisia, for there the Kiosutokyra, the greatest masters of the k'Jtari, were waiting, for there was much for them to teach.

On Tython, the clans gathered around and followed the ninth and largest Tho Yor, rejoicing as it came to hover over the stone monolith that became the Temple of Balance as the other Tho Yor circled around and above.

Sadly, after all they'd done in preparation for this day, the Kwa were not there to see it. In penitence for the role they'd played in these affairs, the Gree escorted some of the elderly Kwi to Tython to watch the ceremony.

In the wake of a powerful Force Storm, these eight spread out across the world, depositing their awestruck students and instructors. The Tythans, who served as both teachers and students, welcomed the mixed races to their world, all of whom were now nationally received into the fold as Tythans, but were collectively referred to by their spiritual demarcation: Je'daii. These went forth to establish centers of learning focused on different aspects of the Force. Such academies would later spread even further, to be established on Caamas, Ossus, and more, but for now, they were focused on Tython, which although not a Sacred World, now became as one during this period.

Teachers of these schools included those from the Dai Bendu; the Followers of Palawa; the Paladins of the Chatos Academy; the Wardens of the Gates who serve the Temple of the Source; the Circle of Thought; the Academy of the Way; the Priests of the Sacred Way; the Friars of Aquine; the Grenzer Wise-Priests, and other benevolent traditions that studied the Great Mystery. They went on to influence the Guardians of the Whills, the Mystics, the Luminous, the Jedi, and other Force-using traditions.

The Caamasi focused on ethics and Elegast's teachings of wisdom, balance, and reverence for life embedded in the Code of the Guardians. Others taught benevolent technologies that would elevate galactic society without harming the worlds and those they shared them with. No matter the specialty, central to their philosophy was the trine principles of Ashla, which represented the crucial aspects of the Light that they were to walk in; Bogan, which represented the external and internal threat of Darkness that was to be guarded against; and Bendu, which dealt with preserving the necessary Balance of life that all must strive for.

This was codified as the Oath of Dedication, first conceived by Hamish Vorne—ancestor of Jedi Master Mordecai Vorne—that Jedi would vow to uphold:

> I do swear on my honor and on the faith of the Brotherhood of Knights to use the Force only for good, denying temptation to evil, turning always from the Darkness; to dedicate my life to the cause of freedom and justice. If I should fail of this vow, my life shall be forfeit, here and hereafter.

SECTION II: INFINITE AND INFERNAL EMPIRES

THE BLACK AND THE RED

Rakatan protectorates swelled to fifteen hundred worlds, for Lehon had been on the border of the Unknown Regions, and they yet had the Star Forge that allowed them to bypass the Celestial seal, which they did in secret, for they were yet wary of the Celestials, though none had been reported in long years. But their Infinite Empire was not as before. Political tension between factions of the Rakatan leadership caused the warrior caste, who currently ruled, to institute a reorganization of their government. "No more," the Black Rakata (or *Bukesek*) declared, "will we cower before entities of legend and myth, nor wait upon the absent gods of our ancestors, for the unlawful rule of the Sith is over. Hereupon, Rakatan Predors will take the place of Darithas, and an Over-Predor will rule in place of the gods. So will we bring the galaxy under our protection!"

This speech did not go well with the Red Rakata (or *Ikalik*), but it was popular amongst the people, so they stayed silent for the time, bowing their heads in submission while clandestinely preparing a different path.

Sundry were the occupied worlds that were used for agricultural purposes or the harvesting of slaves, but it was as with iron flails and cruel morning stars that the Core Worlds were struck, smashing the Galactic Union. Ensuring they would not

easily recover or rise against them, their advanced technology was appropriated or destroyed. In this way were the inhabitants of the Core cast into a dark age.

Obsessed with arcane knowledge, the Infinite Empire did not stop with the Core, arrogating from enemies and allies alike constructs that fascinated them. In this way did they bring about the legendary Forcesabers of the Rakatan Force Hounds and Rakatan holocrons, re-engineered from Kwa technology. The Rakatan hyperdrive that they were most famous for had been re-engineered from stolen Firstborn vessels such as the Kwa's A'nang ships and A'qavish-qerach's Qeracraft which were powered using Force-sensitive energy-charged gems to navigate Hyperspace via the Force.

Rakatan biological creations, such as the Flesh Raiders, were bred in the far-off reaches of the Stratos Distribution. The Lugubraa were transformed from simple farmers into dangerous guards. Monoliths and the monstrous Gharj were reared from the most powerful of Lehon's Giant Rancors.[195] Although the Rancors and Tra'cors were docile creatures of the Firstborn, the Terentas they'd obtained from the Sith on Tython years before were alchemically mutated from Gharj's children and bred to hunt Force-sensitives, and from them came the Terentateks of Korriban.[196]

During this period of expansion, the Council of the Elders, made up of the Red Rakata, took advantage of an emerging crisis to strike against the Black Rakata. This was known as the First Rakatan Civil War. Partway through it, there came a change in the war's goals and direction. Daritha Soa was the catalyst for that change.

RAGE OF THE RAKATAN WARLORD

A Red Rakatan warlord, Daritha Soa was a descendent of one of the giant Rafa kings of old, and an outcast during his youth until his fighting prowess won him respect and titles. He emerged at this time with a large force from the Sith worlds that had earlier been brought under Rakatan control. Soa proclaimed that if the Black Rakata would not atone and submit, they would be put to death as betrayers of the gods. As they would not, so was his rival Infernal Empire established, which at its height took near upon a thousand worlds that had belonged to the Infinite Empire, leaving them a mere five hundred. Soa called his empire the *Siqsadarith*.[197]

But these were not his only targets. By the time he attacked the Jerne Imperium, they were already fractured into independent city-states squabbling over trivial matters. Although they did not war upon one another, they had grown so complacent

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[195] Not to be confused with the ominous, sentient constructs unleashed by the Outer Gods, Monoliths are nigh-unkillable beasts that were augmented by Sith magic and were most famously unleashed by Darth Vitiate on Ziost after draining that world of its life-forces.

[196] The cybernetically enhanced Rancors of Myzar 3 were developed apart from these. As for the Terentateks, a large cargo was hijacked by Rakaans who bred and trained the creatures to serve them.

[197] Siqsadarith is often translated as "Infernal Empire," although the more literal translation might be "cacodaemoniacal," as *siqsa* refers to evil spirits. The derivative *seksa* was later used by the Black Rakata as a slur against all Red Rakata. Note the etymological links to the Sith language and, for that matter, the Arkanian and Myke.

that they were utterly unprepared for the coming of the Infernal Empire. When Daritha Soa demanded the Eternity Crystal, they reluctantly gave him the elaborate fake they'd produced long ago which brought in tourists from around the galaxy. Ascertaining that it was a hoax and that such disrespect for a god (even if not his god) was a capital offense, he razed their thirty-three cities, which fell burning to the ground, setting the unspoiled forests which covered their world aflame.

A true believer, Soa knew that re-establishing the old alliance was key to victory. The great Goddess Belot had said so, but they had failed her test. None now could get close to the Nihil Retreat, and those he sent never returned. The Stygian Caldera, however, was another matter, and it was there that he would turn his focus.

Soa brought several into the fold, but Korriban would not acquiesce. This could not be tolerated, for Korriban was a crucial world that, once part of the Infernal Empire, would give him the authority to command nearly all the worlds of the region, including Ziost and Khar Delba, which had also declined renewal of the ancient alliance.

Ever since the Eruthros turned to darkness on Drômenregn long ago, the Sith were a morally undeveloped people whose principles were derived from the Immortal Gods of the Sith, of whom they did not even have a clear conception. It was enough that if their masters said it, it was to be done. But with the imprisonment of the Outer Gods, death and diminishment of the Old Ones, exile of the Ssither, and captivity of Belot, their civilization, built around a rigid hierarchy, collapsed, leaving the Sith peoples in decline. No longer was there an unquestioned channel, for though laws could be found in whatever black grimoires and accursed codices they'd managed to hold onto, these were subject to the approval and interpretations of competing lords and priests.

By the era of Lord Soa, the Sith's original religion and ideology were as alien concepts, and it is for this reason that those in the Nihil Retreat came to call themselves True Sith, disdaining those in the Stygian Caldera as heretics or egomaniacal fools.

Following the death of Lord Soros years earlier, the next kings of Korriban were the rival monarchies of King Sakkra-Kla and King Nakgru. Each had emerged triumphant by having tamed the various warlords and factions by either reason or force in their respective territories. Now, with only the two left, war was inevitable.

Young Adas was of the bloodline of the Coruscanti Sith who had brought the skull of Mhu'anThul to their world. He'd been hailed as the Chosen One from birth due to the unusual charcoal pigmentation of his skin. Wearied of the wasteful nature of the contending kingdoms, he rose to prominence by initiating peace talks between them. But when Sakkra-Kla and Nakgru arrived with their retainers and royal guards, Adas set loose his Tuk'ata, Shyracks, and K'lor'slugs to shred the flesh and tendons of the warriors on both sides, and he himself joined the fray with his twin battle axes and singing light-sword that had come down to him from his ancestor who had stolen it from the Synagogue of the Ssither following their departure. A prized treasure, it had been taken from a defeated Chan in single combat on Kaldar. With it, Adas beheaded Sakkra-Kla and Nakgru. Recognizing the law of might inherent to their culture, the people exalted Adas to king and even gave him the title *Sith'ari*, which in the tongue of the ancients meant "Supreme Lord."

Upon arriving on Korriban, Lord Soa was pleased to see the Sith had united under a single leader with a measure of wisdom, for King Adas' had promoted powerful vassals in Sith Lords who would jockey amongst themselves for position, while Adas, he noted

with admiration, kept himself more skilled and adept, a necessary trait for a true king, as ultimate strength of body, mind, and spirit was paramount to leadership.

Soa did not appreciate, however, that the king's subjects referred to him as the *Sith'ari*. Inquiring of Adas as to why he'd permit such blasphemy—explaining that in the old religion the designation was reserved for the gods alone—Adas responded cryptically, "In our noble and nescient antiquity, the people feared and revered the gods, unaware that the royals invented them to keep the truculent amongst them in line. In our neoteric age, we have grown past the need of fables to maintain order and have dispensed with the things that held the people back from attaining their highest destiny. Certainly, as an insurgent against the Infinite Empire, you understand the wisdom of casting off unenlightened ideas and false traditions."

Had King Adas bothered to learn the ideology of Daritha Soa, he would have refrained from stating such things, but isolated as they'd been on Korriban, and judging by surface appearances, he committed the single worst mistake he could have.

Lord Soa's scowl was a mask of horror. He knew then that the Sith of Korriban had lost their way. If this sacrilegious and arrogant rebuke of the Ancient Powers was what they counted as *wisdom*, the Infernal Empire would teach them otherwise.

He withdrew to his giant battlecraft. Adas puzzled over this, uncertain as to what slight he might have made until his court magician, Raspir, informed him. Too late, Lord Soa reemerged with Gharj, the Father of the Terentateks, and Silentior, an annihilation droid he'd used before to help subjugate worlds unwilling to see reason.

Before the assembled Sith, Soa announced: "Because you have had ignorant, weak, and *heathen* leaders, you have gone the way of the beast, crawling in the muck while calling it enlightenment. I now reclaim the Sith people for the old gods who first raised you up out of the dirt! This *Adas* has deceived you and robbed you of the glorious destiny of your people! But *I* remember the traditions of the Serpent Lords, the heights achieved by the great Ankath, the victories you were led to by the Ninûshwodzakut! And *I* will restore you to your rightful place in history! Any who wishes to simper and fawn with the Traitor King will never again see the dawn!"

This was the death-knell for King Adas, for he could not prevail against Daritha Soa and so was forced into hiding, an abdication hastened by the betrayal of Yshaar Kael, his chamberlain, who convinced his fellow nobles and military leaders to follow Soa. "The Infernal Empire is too powerful to defeat!" Kael argued. "Is not the very stature of Daritha Soa proof that he is descended of the gods and, therefore, our *true* emperor?"

Only his court magician, Raspir, and a few others who refused to be ruled by Rakatan outsiders supported King Adas, but they were hardly enough to fight back against the Infernal Empire and concluded they had little choice but to dissimulate or die.

From the Rakatan titles of Darr tah ("immortal") and Daritha ("emperor" or "god-king"), the Korribanian Sith now bestowed on Soa the portmanteau *Dathka*, which comes down to us as *Darth*—the first to be thus called, though some historians consider all who held the progenitive nomenclature to have also held the Darth title.

Darth Soa reorganized his Infernal Council so that it would be made up of a union of Stygian Sith and Rakata with a smattering of Humans from Grizmallt, allowing no race to outrank the other, for he'd seen firsthand how such petty divisions could splinter and destroy an empire.

THE DESPOT OF ATRISIA

Emperor Jaure Tche ruled Kitel Phard in these days. The descendent of the great Kitel Khan and ancestor of Uueg Tching, the infamous Atrisian Emperor who reunified their world and authored *The Sayings* (which inspired a young Palpatine), Emperor Tche was considered the greatest of all of Darth Soa's servants due to his fierce devotion. He was also a murderous megalomaniac.

Though the feline Agasami of Kuoka were yet favored by the Emperor, the Dragons would have nothing to do with him and hid themselves. Numerous citizens fled to Ropagi II after he sacrificed ten thousand of his own subjects upon the twin pyramids of Jar'Kai in dedication to Wapoe, heralded as the Atrisian god of disguise (Wapoe being a mask for Abhoth the Unclean who first corrupted Tche in his youth).

This abhorrent act had been meant to cow the citizens into absolute obedience.

It had the opposite effect.

The People's Rebellion would be led by the Yovshin Swordsmen who for years had trained in secret with the Guardians of the Breath. Their mastery of the twin swords was greater than Emperor Tche's mastery of the shield and spear. Neither his command of the Dark Side nor his pride in the blood of Ravaath that flowed through his veins could stop the Swordsmen from smiting his ruin upon the side of the ziggurat.

But Emperor Tche's manipulations followed him after his death, with his loyalists continuing to plague the nations of Atrisia for millennia.

On Naboo, however, Tche's despotism led to the reestablishment of the k'Jtari, who sought to create a peaceful realm in harmony with the wisdom of their ancestors. The timing was fortuitous, as Naboo would soon face plunder with the arrival of Sith forces seeking to revive the cultic practices of the old Sethan kingdom. Once more would the k'Jtrari willingly give their lives in protection of the native Gungans and their Zilkin allies, buying them time to secure refuge, which for some became the vast undersea realm where they live to this day.[198]

Abidingly did the Gungans honor their ancient saviors, ever keeping vigil over the Sacred Places. But the Humans of Grizmallt who came millennia later to Naboo would oft shake their heads and laugh at the "quaint customs of primitives."

OUT OF THE CAULDRON...

With massive Sith armies at his back, a sizable fleet of warships, and the aid of Dark Side-infused hyperdrives, Darth Soa forged a hazardous and impermanent trail out of the Stygian Caldera, allowing the Infernal Empire to proceed towards the heart of the Infinite Empire. But it was here that his winning streak came to an end, for even he could not prevail against the eldritch powers of the Star Forge, which placed Darth Soa and his Infernal Council in a deathless sleep in the Eternity Vault on Belsavis.

[198] The Gungans name for the Zilkin is Glurrg. They are closely related to the Seidaot.

The end of the Infernal Empire allowed King Adas to reclaim Korriban and begin preparations for war, for he knew the victorious Infinite Empire would not be far behind their rivals in pressing to establish dominance over them. And just as predicted, several Predors and Force Hounds arrived with their armies as triumphant heroes to hail the "fellow enemies of the Infernal Empire." As a gesture of goodwill, they gifted King Adas with the lost secrets of holocron technology looted from the defeated Infernal Council. But King Adas was wiser now, and understood the expectation for Korriban to fall meekly in line. So he played the role to the hilt. For their part, the Predors underestimated the extent to which war had weakened their empire, nor did they know how the old lore, brought back by Darth Soa, had reenergized the Korribani Sith. When suddenly powerful mages, augmented creatures, and skilled soldiers surmounted them, they were taken wholly by surprise.

Though the Sith had prevailed, King Adas lost his life in that battle. Though his light-sword was lost as well, his spirit endured, bound to his grimoire and passed down to his loyal *Jen'azgûl* (Shadow Hand), Bilious Torment, who brought it to Onderon by way of Arkania. So would Adas' teachings influence the Sith in the era to come.

The victory of the Stygian Sith in 27,700 BBY, coupled with the death of Predor Skal'nas at Tython, were sufficient to diminish Rakatan power and trigger the Second Rakatan Civil War. And as they turned more frequently to the use of the Star Forge to impose their will, they were overtaken by a psychosis brought on by the vile engines hungrily draining them. As Sub-Predors turned on each other and in-fighting took its toll, opening the way for the Rakatan slave revolt to succeed, the Rakata brought about the beginning of their end. And though they might have recovered from even this, the events that followed finished their civilization for good.

INTO THE FIRE

Infused with grim, recondite powers, Rakatan Predors had begun receiving visions of the coming of Horliss-Horliss to destroy their Star Forges and keep them locked away in the lonely wastes of the Forbidden Zone forever. Dreading this fate, they remembered the old religion that Soa had so vehemently preached and stretched out their senses to the void with their technomantic abilities to see if indeed anything might answer. Some *thing* reached back and spoke to them: "Go to Mortigan," it commanded in a voice that brooked no dissension, "seek out the Gray Swallowing… bring back the Hollower of Beings, for this one alone can stop the Celestials."

Reasoning that it was a necessary evil, a task force was sent to Mortigan to retrieve the divine aid they believed would help them in the defeat of the Elder Gods.

The Killik hives dwelt now in the Unknown Regions where they kept vigil over the Lord of Pestilence, but they were unaware of the stealthy Rakatan hyperdrives that allowed their scouting party to slip through to Mortigan.

As the scouting party disembarked on the sickly, withered world to find and convince this mysterious Old One to aid them in the deicide of the Celestials, Mnggal-Mnggal began to ooze out of the deep fissures and hollowed trees. It had been some

time since last he fed, and he took his time stalking and absorbing the Rakatan team. Only the final member of their party, Psetthur Rail, managed to survive long enough to return to his ship. An engineer and the brightest member of the group, he fought valiantly, if vainly, until the end, while in the midst of pre-flight checks, he saw it burbling there behind his seat… the corruption that had stalked him across Mortigan.

The Devourer animated him and the other bodies of the task force, which flew back to Lehon laughing and gibbering like madmen of the way in which they'd accomplished their mission of bringing the Gray Swallowing.

It was in 25,200 BBY that Mnggal-Mnggal arrived to find the Force-sensitive Rakatans a regal banquet for a gourmand. He glutted himself on the wondrous delicacies, be they overlords or slaves. Whether in the form of bulging, bloating corpses that ran amok or in his own misshapen mass of eyes, entrails, and limbs, he feasted upon their flesh and expanded. causing no small panic in those attempting to flee.

"Alas, that I cannot remain to finish the job," Mnggal-Mnggal said to the Over-Predor trapped on his throne, clinging tightly to a Turag crystal as if his baubles could help him, "for there are yet more worlds under your dominion that I might savor, such as Dathomir and Byss. But I cannot afford to be too greedy at this time, for that hateful Horliss-Horliss is even now gathering his sycophantic Killik servitors!"

"You were *supposed* to devour the Celestials! To bring the galaxy under the rule of the old gods and their faithful servants!" the proud Rakatan Over-Predor exclaimed as Mnggal-Mnggal crawled up his legs. He cried to his court and turned to his guards for help, only to find that he was surrounded by oozing undead Force Hounds and pustulant Predors.

"Oh, but this *is* what my rule looks like," he said before engulfing him.

While yet swallowing the ruler from the top down, Mnggal-Mnggal addressed his court, though he knew they were long past hearing and that he was merely talking to himself. But that suited him just fine. "Once I have all of the Rakatan worlds serving as my army, I will strike at the Celestials! What will they taste like, I wonder?"

With the psychosis from the Star Forge already dispersed throughout their worlds, it was that much easier for Mnggal-Mnggal to catch his prey. But upon Dathomir he was thwarted and could only harvest a few souls, for another entity controlled that world, one who had fought long and hard for possession of it, and she tolerated no rivals![199]

He moved on to Byss, which the Rakata had ruled for five thousand years. Annihilating the unsuspecting inhabitants of that world, Mnggal-Mnggal took ships and swelled to others. He remained on the move, leaving behind only portions of himself, for he wasn't yet ready to face the Celestials, though he longed to.

The Celestials could not be harmed by the Devourer, but the Firstborn could.

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[199] The surviving ichor of Mnggal-Mnggal contained within these poor Dathomiran souls were brought together, expelled, and, in a rare example of dominion over the Cancer God, bent to the Dread Mother's will. She later entrusted it to her Nightsisters, who interred their dead in pods containing but a single precious drop, transforming them into zombies ready to be awoken in the hour of greatest need.

Nestled on the twin-sunned world of Mlok, far off in Amhranair, now known as Companion Forn, the Mloki had chosen a course of staunch independence at the start of the Cosmic Wars. The top portion of the floating Mloki was like a tendrilled disc; the lower portion, which held their eyes, was akin to an upright marine ray with three webbed, hanging tassels. Portaling to different realms, they'd studied and brought back much knowledge, but it was the Humans that were of endless fascination to them. Determined to have some living amongst them, they transported a colony from Belsavis to their world. But to Human eyes, Mlok was as a horror to them, as bizarre and unpleasant as the worlds of Illathurion. So, with the use of mind-altering surgeries and drugs, they tried to alter the Human perception, hoping in this way to help their guests see Mlok as delightfully as they did. While this had some success, the procedures had the side-effect of changing the Human appearance into that of hulking brutes. The experiment as a whole was deemed a failure, and they returned the people (now called Mluki) to Belsavis and looked for ways to improve their techniques and find an individual more adaptatible. It was cruel irony, for just as they did, Mnggal-Mnggal penetrated their system as a black cloud.

They had hoped, in their neutrality, to be left alone, but their rejection of all the powers, good or evil, left them vulnerable. *Too late, too late!* they thought as protoplasmic black rain fell upon their world, consuming everything in its path.

For long years Mnggal-Mnggal kept the Celestials busy searching for him across the blighted and unhallowed expanse while they followed his trail of death and undeath, eradicating any pieces of him he'd left behind across the various worlds, all the while unaware that yet another part of him remained hidden under the crust of Mortigan laughing at the wild bantha chase he'd led them on.

Finally, when they thought to have wiped him out, he slide off into the shadows, manifesting again on various occasions: unleashed by Sith sorcery on Odacer-Faustin in the Outer Rim, an event otherwise known as Darth Drear's Folly, and again when the tiniest viral quantity of him was called up by the black magic of Darth Scabrous, bringing him percolating forth as the loathsome Sickness. Mnggal-Mnggal was unnaturally patient, and invariably would the Cancer God rise up as a force of chaos, as the bane of worlds, knowing the time of the Great Pestilence was certain to come!

SECTION III: WARLORDS AND DESPOTS

Rule of so vast a galaxy was a hopeless phantasy, but this reality failed to hamper the perverse and obsessive desires of those who would try to conquer the myriad inhabited worlds across the vast millennia. Many were the mighty houses, federations, syndicates, satrapies, empires, and warlords that rose and fell during the Twilight Wars. Some were assassinated by their own associates, such as the conqueror Zakrinand Minus, after he put an end to a number of barbaric regimes. Some devoured themselves, such as the transgalactic Council of Corporations, who were finished off by one of those they'd betrayed. Some were destroyed by greater kingdoms, such as the Cygnus Star Empire, who fell to their own malfeasance before they

could spread further harm, and the Starwolves of Varna, who had been taken down by the Interstellar Patrol of the Federation of Stars. Countless were torn apart by internecine struggles, like the Gorach Ascendency which came near to the level of the Rakata before infighting and the revolution of their subjects wiped them out. And not a few were defeated by covert or overt forces of light. Such was the case for the Empire on Aquilae, the tyrannical Belisarius and his Imperium, and the Arakacian Empire, who after a centuries-long rule following the discovery of the Water of Immortality were smashed by the six-eyed Holylanders.

Although a great and farraginous number of the armies of the Enemy had been killed, conquered, or held at bay by the heroes of the galaxy, their client races continued to fight for dominance. But devoid of those terrible powers to lead them, the Twilight Wars were finally over.

THE BATTLE OF TEN

Despite the many faults of Xim the Despot, of whom much has been written, there was considerable good that he'd accomplished that none before him had been able to do. Before he was corrupted by the Warlocks of Iqqua and took on the title Daritha Xim, he is noted for having climbed the ten stories of the Pelgrin Oracle, where he witnessed the suffering that went on under the cruel coalitions of the slavers. And so he brought to an end the slave empires that had until then held such cruel dominion:

> The Qadel, a green, squat, amphibious race, had swelled into a brutal slave syndicate that controlled a sizable swath of the galaxy and held dominance amongst the nine competing slave federations; following their defeat, they adopted the name they operated under in other sectors, the Gvort.
>
> The Ermi, a mountain race of bipedal stoats that had been enslaved themselves until they broke free of the Qadel only to begin hunting and selling Lepi meat and others amongst the Beast Races;
>
> The Izi were a horned, hawk-like matriarchal race of predators who lived on Onderon until they fought and lost a war with the Humans who colonized that world; in revenge, they targeted Humans to sell to the highest bidders;
>
> The Veeza were the spacefaring remnant of the Viis Empire who'd been tasked with expanding the Viis Empire before Viisymel fell. A faction of Veeza dissenters opposed the harsh dictates of their rulers and established a peaceful colony on Vesari in the Inner Rim and are now known as Vesarians;
>
> The Gorfodi were the strong, blue-and-green-skinned rulers of the Caste formerly known as the Agorhyffen, and are renowned for their greed and violence;

After Xim smashed their syndicate, the four-armed, blue-furred Myill changed their name to Pho Ph'eahians and stayed closer to their homeworld;

The reptilian Thalassians of Meram had long before been targeted by the Langhesi Vanguard, who'd driven them out of Thalassa. When Xim sought to finish the job the Langhesi started, the Thalassians deferred to their prior tactics and feigned defeat, knowing the warlord wouldn't live forever;

Sith allies, the Malagarrians were a hostile, mushroom-like humanoid race augmented by the Malak from the Agarians of Illathurion. They worked behind the scenes, using slavery to fund an advanced and far-reaching civilization. Only artifacts of the dissolute Malagarrian Confederation are seen today in ruins or place-names such as the Malabar Construct, Malachor, Maladi, Malador, the Malaga Cluster, Malagarr, and a secret library on Malrev IV that only the old Kashi Mer and Sith knew of;

The Zoa'mon, known as the Worm Men, were a particularly mysterious and vicious league who consumed most of their captures and sold the surplus.

By the end of the Battle of Ten, the hold of darkness was broken, and the slaves were free. Their domination ended, there would emerge one of the greatest galactic governments the galaxy had ever seen.[200]

THE END OF THE COSMIC WARS

The stars ever called to the inhabitants of the Core, who watched with eyes of ignorance, blissfully unaware of the strange events yet shaping the galaxy. During the imposed dark age of the Rakata, they'd invented Sleeper ships, sometimes called Hibernation ships. These were a great improvement on the ancient Generation ships, as they put their passengers in a state of suspended animation until some crucial event woke them or their voyage neared its end.[201] Towards the waning days of the Infinite Empire, they were abandoned as the technology of Rakatan ships was re-engineered without the use of Dark Side powering devices, allowing those in the Core to finally have hyperdrive engines of their own. With the fall of the Rakata and the final end of the Cosmic Wars, the formerly subjugated races were again free to explore, and they burst beyond the Inner Rim to span the void between stars, giving rise to a new generation of travelers—Humans, Duros, Baragwin, Verpine, Devaronians, Zabraks, Twi'leks, and many others—a period some consider to be a Fourth Breath.

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[200] While Xim did indeed exterminate their empires, the races themselves lived on (save for the Malagarrians). Quad-Lo, who operated the slave circuit on Bazarre, was a prominent member of the Qadel race. As with the Thalassians, they otherwise continued to practice slavery, albeit in other sectors of space far from the Tion Cluster.

[201] Akin to the cryotubes Terra I had been utilizing since the War of Temporal Planes in which passengers could enter hypersleep for long journeys.

Amongst the many far-spanning governments that came about in the Expansionist Era (which ran 25 to 20,000 BBY), the Kingdom of Cron became Xim's Empire; the Federation of Stars morphed into the relatively just Mid-Galactic Empire (with the Interstellar Patrol morphing into the Infinity Guard); and following the ratification of the Galactic Constitution during the Unification Wars, many of the worlds of the former Galactic Union (previously the Galactic Federation) that had collapsed at the height of the Infinite Empire, along with other relatively newer coalitions such as the Azure Imperium, coalesced into the far larger Galactic Republic.

From this era to the Great Manifest Period (20 to 17,000 BBY), the Parliament of the Precursors slowly faded and dissolved altogether, for their time had come to its end. Forthcoming generations forgot the promises and warnings of the Celestials, dismissing the supernatural events of the past as myths. Slower to forget were the Elder Races for whom the uncounted ages of vanished splendor were as bittersweet reverie.

Though the triumphs and terrors of the Cosmic Wars were lost or relegated to legends, sometimes, in the small, whisper-haunted hours of the night or on dusky, gloom-shrouded days, the long shadow of its outstretched aeons might be felt… and then some might wonder disquietedly, and some might dream strange dreams, but most would only shiver in the unquiet stirrings of the heart…

INTERLUDE III

THE STARS WILL FALL, THEN ALL WILL DIE

It is a week after my return home.

Events go on as normal in the outside world, but it as if peering through an old and unwashed window. Their busy, buzzing activities seem trite; their controversies absurd; their diversions vapid; only in their suffering is the truth reflected. I do not resent them for their inability to see or imagine. How could they? Save for holos, which are mere amusements that they walk away from, they have no framework for the wakeful darkness that threatens to engulf them. But ignorance will save none when the armies of death march down into the valley, when the phantasmagoria of hate and hunger and horror that is as a fantasy to the multitudes comes to feast.

But for the accursed whose eyes have seen the truth of the Nihil Retreat, of that which spreads in the Unknown Regions, of the nameless things in the Charnel Worlds and the maddening void whose tendrils press beyond the barrier of Skyriver, such things are seared as a brand on my mind and spirit.

Night comes, and I lie awake anticipating the sun's return, ruminating on broken columns in misty ruins carved with abnormal characters under great domed temples, wondering if some answer yet lies there overlooked, a way out of the coming doom.

When I manage to sleep, I dream of unknown and lonely vistas, of stars that fell long ago that only the damned can see. And in dreams, there is no fear but glorious careening flight through the enormous emptiness of space where before me the glorious jewelled worlds of the galaxy come rushing forward, mine for all eternity… mine to rule!

In sweat I awaken. Seeing nothing, but feeling the presence of they who have no form staring down at me in the unlit gloom, I leap up to throw on a light before they can touch me with their abominable fingers. The switch is not where it should be. Or I have miscalculated its location in the dark and I scramble in panic to find it. The phantoms move closer. My hand sweeps over the panel, and light bathes the room. There is nothing there, of course. Nightmares are not real.

But the phantoms *are* there, invisible to mortal eyes, hidden in shadow.

Work, ever my salvation, brings me around. There are friendly faces here amongst the tangled ones that spread like obscene weeds with evil faces and sharp thorns. Misqa and Cuenyne liven my spirits, keeping me focused. It is good to have helpers, but soon I will be forced to send them away, as I know the dangers will only escalate as the days go by. And they will want to stay.

But after what occurred today, I cannot allow it.

Another night passed in fitful hallucinations of cubed shapes that pried into the hearts of the living… I float with them through the impossible angles of non-

Euclidean planes, passing over a quartzlike field of crystal people who cried out in terror as they blackened and died in our wake, feeding our strength while we gloated in eagerness for the many fields that yet lay ahead.

I start as Cuenyne enters the room silently. It is early afternoon. In his manipulator arm is a holodisc. "Get dressed," he says and departs.

In my study some moments later, accompanied by a cup of caf, the droid, and a grim-looking Misqa, who has been trying her best these past few days to be encouraging but feels for once in her life that she has reached the limit of her abilities, we listen to the recording I'd been making. The tale is complete, but it aught not to be, as I am yet far from completing it. It is my voice, but I have no memory of having recorded it. The horror is compounded by the fact that what I am saying in the recording is a complete fiction. Yet, somehow, in the middle of the night, I had awoken from bed and narrated a fabrication.

I destroy it as Cuenyne examines the other holodiscs. He has been diligent in keeping multiple copies. From henceforth, I will use flimsiplast as the starting point, and we will go from there.

Several weeks passed. There had been no repeat of the uncanny incident, but that is likely because Cuenyne keeps a vigil in my room at night, and the moment I stir from bed, he interrogates me. It is not without some humor, as in most cases I merely require the 'fresher…

In my prior revision, I'd removed all elements that I thought would prove unpalatable while holding back other aspects that would perhaps be regarded as impossible for me to know. But they are now being restored. As to my prior concerns, they are fears of the old Hextrophon. I am no longer that man. Colleagues and critics will scoff and say I suffer from the burnout associated with those who have seen too much. But the fire that has burned me burns deeper still, and that which impels the flames chars without restraint, and so the brushfires it started are but a foretaste of what is to come when the entire galaxy is ablaze. And while they waste time on banal disagreements and a thousand petty squabbles, death creeps nearer.

It seems like very long ago that I'd thought and behaved as they do, refusing to see that which could not be measured in terms of conventional means. I do not miss the blind comforts of untruth, a mindset of arrogance and pride that arose from our ever-evolving marvels that told us we were masters of reality rather than its servants glancing at but the barest fractions of truth, missing the dunes for the grain of sand, consigning the desert to mirage.

Perhaps with greater knowledge, the galaxy might avert some of the sorrow that is coming, combat it, or at least stand on the right side of the conflict. Yet even as I write this, I know it to be another comforting lie. The truth has always been there, gently falling like the rain. The downpour presented in this account will serve but to annoy and irritate them. Yet, rain it must, with hail and thunder and lightning as never before seen or heard!

Perhaps we are not meant to survive and are arrogant to think otherwise when we have done so little to deserve it, we who see not ourselves as we truly are, destroyers as much as creators, ignoring the harm we inflict on others, the countless horrors that we've brought forth… What need us more monsters than what we ourselves have been, save perhaps to hasten our just demise?

It is an easy judgement to pronounce. Many have made it. It is incomplete, however, hasty and harsh and blind to another occurrence that goes on in secret without fanfare and trumpets: the good amidst the bad. There is yet compassion, hope, and wisdom in abundance and not a few who have turned aside from evil, and it is for all of these that we should survive. Herein lies the greatness of the people found not in wealth or power but in heart and spirit.

If only for their sake, we must accept the greater truth and be prepared!

The day is at hand to ask Cuenyne and Misqa to depart. The hour is later than it should be, for in my weakness I allowed them to stay longer than I should have. Misqa has not been herself, and there are days where she is utterly absent, lost in some far away rumination, but of what, she does not tell, claiming it is merely overwork. Perhaps she does not know. But it is disturbing. At first, she did not believe the phenomenon was occurring. Even when Cuenyne showed her a holo of her standing for hours unmoving, she chalked it up to stress and lack of sleep.

But she has been seeing and hearing things. Cuenyne has recorded strange sounds and inexplicable images. Whatever it is that now haunts us no longer waits until the cover of night, and I glimpse the creeping of black shapes in the daytime. Cuenyne continues to stand guard so as to prevent a repetition of the automatic writing incident, but I worry for Misqa, who seems to have become their target. In one of her fugue states, she spoke of "the great mysteries that await all those invited to partake of the pleasures in the dimensions beyond sight and sound."

Things escalated from there. This morning, in the hours before I began to compose this missive, the delivery man arrived. He is a friendly chap who regularly brings food and supplies. All of a sudden, after depositing our provisions on the table, he froze in place. For a considerable time, he stood there silently, unresponsive to voice or touch… and then his face contorted, morphing into something ugly, and he began to whisper.

The words were inaudible at first, but they grew in volume until they drowned out all other sound or thought, for they were nothing less than a sinister refrain of that hateful black speech that once threatened and mocked us from the lips of Areana.

"The gates are opening… *they who blaspheme and boil in the Outer Darkness* have awoken… your blood will be drained and your corpse taken, puppets for the masters… The time is hand… the stars will fall, then all will die."

The delivery man awoke then as if from a stupor; embarrassed, he apologized for having drifted off and, clearly not feeling well, promptly departed.

Following this, I withdrew to the confines of my room where I record this…

I have now sent my companions off, insisting that I would continue to send updates as I approached the close of the work.

So, I prepare for that which is coming…

CHAPTER SEVENTY

XENDOR AND THE FIRST GREAT SCHISM

For the Sith of the Stygian Caldera, the end of the Cosmic Wars was a period of upheaval. Without King Adas to lead them, the Korribani became susceptible once more to political, religious, and clan rivalries. This time, however, they took a different path, remembering that the stars held other worlds and that it might be best to gain strength by allies rather than continuing on with the deleterious attrition of war that had seen the disintegration of their kind time and again. By means of the Rakatan ships hard won in battle, they ranged across the many worlds of the Stygian Caldera, establishing allied coalitions with neighboring kingdoms such as Ziost, which became third in cultural, religious, and military importance to the Sith.

They also explored and settled planets outside the Esstran sector, occasionally discovering isolated Sith tribes from millennia earlier, including those who'd built the great armory in the wilds of Onderon. They'd have spread further, but as the Caldera shifts over time in slow rotation, previously discovered Hyperspace routes eventually collapse and become impassable, severing tentative links with the greater galaxy. It would be over twenty thousand years before the Sith locked in this region would emerge from it. But their legacy would find a foothold in other, unexpected ways.

The Sith had hitherto believed in the Unity, a concept devoid of moral and metaphysical opposites. In the years following their victory over the Infinite Empire, however, Sith priests instead applied and taught moral dualism to their students, as this had been made comprehensible to them by the spirit and holocron of King Adas who induced belief in the idea that dedication to such principles, coupled with *ego*, would allow them to become as gods themselves. So was laid the philosophical seeds for the malignant strain of narcissistic Sith that came to dominate in later years.

Those who clung to the old beliefs of the Unity were deemed heretics and banished. Relocating on Tund, then called Tond, they were taken by the arcane Yarkdao and trained by the Priests of Chig, who were Chiggnash, and so went on to become the Sorcerers of Tund. The Tund's nihilistic ideology was in many ways similar to the Sorcerers of Rhand who had ontologically diverged earlier, for they too did not see in terms of light and dark, but rather only the Dark, an all-encompassing philosophy of amoral entropy and destruction against which life, order, and creation were but illusions. Dwelling beyond the galaxy's rim, the Sorcerers of Tund serve as the vanguard of the Sith Empire, with malefic thaumaturges such as Karnak the Maleficent acting as agents of discord serving the True Sith as prophets and pawns for the Infernal Gods.[202]

[202] For the Tundites to be regarded as True Sith requires a broader application of the term than espoused by the *Collective History of the True Sith*, by Lord Raptus, which referred to them as Sith purebloods, a definition disseminated by the writings of Jedi scholar Gnost-Dural who studied Raptus' text in order to better understand the enemy assaulting the Republic in the Great Galactic War.

As the Celestials had long before planned, new Defenders had arisen in the form of the Jedi and other benevolent Force users, harbingers of light to stave off the engineers of malice. But every now and again, a candle would dim and go out, and then the darkness that had been kept at bay by that light would creep forward a few steps.

Three thousand and two hundred years after the death of King Adas, in 24,500 BBY, the earliest of the fallen Jedi emerged as the catalyst for what became known as the First Great Schism. It would start with two lovers:

Arden Lyn was a student out of the Palawan tradition. Xendor was a Kashi Jedi Knight who taught at the Academy of the Abstruse on Ossus. He was renowned for having met the Ones during one of his journeys to better understand the Sacred Way.

It was not uncommon for Xendor to teach his students about the alternative ways of harnessing the Force, but something had changed in him at some point in his tenure, something had festered in his mind and poisoned his heart… and it stemmed from his time spent in the Malagarrian library on Malrev IV—an incident that he would not speak of even with Lyn.[203]

The first signs that things were amiss came when he started incorporating the verboten teachings of Bogan and philosophy of *Jen'qo*, the Way of the Dark or the "Dark Path," which he taught not as academic abstractions but for practical use.

Believing he had merely overstepped, the High Council asked respectfully that he put such lessons aside. Xendor suggested instead that the Council sanction a new academy to explore the more esoteric aspects of the Force. This struck the Council as an odd request. "Changing the location of the school doesn't render the danger of the subject null and void," argued Grand Master Gann Gosam, a Xi'Dec. "I'm surprised that you fail to see that. Can you not see how such lessons would prove perilous for students?"

But Xendor pressed his argument. "While the Way of the Dark might be unsafe for laymen and first-season students, we already teach experienced practitioners alchemy and other applications that might be considered *perilous*. Why? Because we understand and implement *all* the ways in which the Force manifests. Their very existence is reason enough to know of and use them rather than pretend they aren't there or hide from them like frightened rabbits."

"The *existence* of something does not mean it is always beneficent to use for our own ends!" declared Grand Master Tertonches, the Wol Cabasshite head of the High Council. "Are there not limits to our own behavior? The ancient Enemy employed these very manifestations to great harm. Do we not have a moral duty to stay in the path of light? We may test the boundaries, but you would have us cast aside all bounds to venture in darkness, the very thing our ancestors opposed and for which reason we have been gathered, studying and learning how to *wisely* wield power!"

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[203] According to a minion of Lettow called Imu, an ancient talisman of the Outer Gods, known only as the Stealer of Souls, touched the mind of Xendor. This may have been a lie to inflate the worth of Imu's treasures, which passed down a line of his descendants to the deranged Humat, who, after incorporating the teachings of Vianism into the forgotten necromancies of Harla to create a new shamanism called the Jarvashqiine, fled to Coruscant only to die under the claws of the very beasts he reanimated.

"We live in an age of enlightenment, Grand Master," Xendor countered dismissively. "Knowledge and science have provided us the light of progress and understanding, and yet the High Council still wishes to espouse archaic platitudes and stories of heroes and monsters that, entertaining as they are, are historically untenable and laughably outmoded to most beings in the galaxy."

To this, Tertonches harrumphed, but Grand Master Ciaran Fardreamer, a Human from Coruscant, grew incensed. "I've heard your lessons. Because we live in an uneventful time, you teach that it must ever have been so prosaic, and that the old wars were but small skirmishes told by primitive peoples. Because science has produced glowrods and illumi-strips to chase away the dark, you forget that the darkness still exists, as do the shadows that walk within it!"

"He is young," Tertonches stated, "and assumes much. Do not let the intellectual fashions of our modern clime make you doubt the ancient, unchangeable nature of right and wrong, though forgotten or declared obsolete such may be."

Xendor resented this speech. He had grown prideful and arrogant and did not like to feel patronized. Also, Arden Lyn blindly and insecurely loved him and, to ensure her place in his heart, supported whatever ideas he put forward, irrespective of their lack of wisdom. So Xendor and Lyn started a campaign to recruit other academics and students, convincing them of the "untenable and archaic moralistic predilection of the High Council." Once they'd gathered a large enough following of those attracted by the idea of the "darker mysteries," he and Lyn led them from Ossus to establish a new unsanctioned academy on Lettow. To give it an air of respectability, they taught the usual admixture of Force traditions reflected at the Ossus academies.

It was not long before rumors reached Ossus of the forbidden lore taught at the Academy of the Enlightened and the mayhem it was causing amongst its students.

The High Council sent a team to investigate. Upon their return, the Grand Masters of Ossus published a scathing renunciation of the curriculum provided at the Lettow Academy that demonstrated how its syllabus led to empirically harmful results, citing psychological problems, spiritual corruption, suicides, murders, and violence amongst students that was unheard of in the Jedi-sanctioned academies.

The missive had the desired effect, leading to diminished enrollment as students dropped out and returned to the Jedi enclaves. Xendor was infuriated. Apprehending that the Jedi represented an existential threat to their goals, he and Lyn agreed that more extreme measures would have to be taken. Their Academy of the Enlightened embarked on a full-scale propaganda campaign that presented the Jedi as intolerant, self-righteous, judgmental dictators. Meanwhile, Xendor made curriculum compliance mandatory for students and teachers and the academy's mission statement was now geared towards enrollment in the newly formed Legions of Lettow.

This proved controversial, and as the faculty became more militaristic, many who resisted, spoke out, or tried to leave disappeared. Word reached the High Council of this and of the Legions of Lettow. The High Council did not want to use violence, but the Grand Masters knew that decisive action was required. The Legions of Lettow were thereby declared a hostile and extreme cult that had to be stopped before more students were harmed or killed.

It was just the excuse Xendor needed to prove his point and launch his war on the Jedi. By now, his Legions had been so well indoctrinated by lies and hate that they were burning with zeal to fight those they saw as a spiritual menace. Appointing himself as Dark Underlord, Xendor sent his elite Black Knights to combat the Jedi on Ossus, and from there conflict would spread to the newly formed Galactic Republic. But Xendor's attempt to turn the Republic against the Jedi, utilizing much of the same propaganda he'd used to indoctrinate his students, failed, and he was instead condemned as a wanton traitor and vicious warlord.

It is said that Xendor's greatest achievement was the Soulsaber. This was a ghastly weapon forged in his stronghold on Corbos from an idea he'd gleaned when hearing of the Mortis Dagger. Akin to the Forcesaber in that required the user to draw on negative emotions, it was fashioned as a Dragon-carved, bronze-hilted, violet-black bladed laser sword that could drive its wielder into a state of abandon, corrupt weaker Lightsiders by mere proximity, and tempt even the stoutest Jedi with a graze.

One evening, Xendor discovered his most loyal follower, Vormijj, attempting to seduce Lyn. Rather than slay him, he sent him on a one-man crusade to the jungle world of Pamorjal to defeat the Jedi community who dwelt there amongst the three temples of the capital Beldon (named after the buoyant creature that once drifted in its atmosphere). Vormijj knew this was a suicide mission prompted by jealousy, so he stole the Soulsaber before leaving. After killing several Jedi Knights and Masters at the feet of their grey-stoned pyramids, Vormijj fled to the continent's southern hemisphere. But the Ithorians that dwelt nearby could feel the dark stain of the Soulsaber and revealed his hideout, and there, in a conflict that created the Badlands, he was slain. The wicked blade was taken by the Jedi and hidden on an unnamed planet where it would not be rediscovered until the Galactic Civil War.

Grandmaster Awdrysta Pina was called "Green Blade" by his allies. Across Brentaal IV, Chandrila, Coruscant, and Metellos, Pina led the Jedi against the Legions of Lettow before finally ending Xendor's life in combat on Columus.

He was less successful with Arden Lyn on Irkalla. Lyn wore the Orixa Talisman (now known as the Kashi Mer Talisman) that had been gifted to her by Xendor after he'd augmented it with some of his most powerful enchantments. The Talisman shattered Pina's blade, mortally wounding him. But before he died, Pina retaliated with the use of a precarious technique called *morichro*, which stopped Lyn's heart. Lyn was rescued by the remnant of her forces and placed in stasis and entombed with her Talisman. There she remained for over twenty-four thousand years.

The Jedi proved victorious in the First Great Schism. Moreover, their victory was seen as vindication of their ideology, which came to be elevated above other Force traditions. Xendor's fallen Jedi would later colloquially be termed "Dark Jedi," though many objected to that designation, while the term "Minions of Xendor" would be used as an expletive.

The Second Great Schism would not prove as easy to curtail, but that was yet many years in the future.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-ONE

DWELLERS OF THE DEEP

THE TALE OF PROTAS

Of all the tales that came during the Expansionist Era that are directly connected to events in the Cosmic Wars of old, two of the most tragic belonged to the Firstborn Kharubdians.

Kharubdians (or Kharubdis) were the great megalodons who once roamed the vast oceans of Jerrilek (which they were sometimes erroneously called). They were the Progenitors of the Karkarodon, Selkath, Tolos, Multupos, Lomin, Trulalis, Pitrolean (later Patrolian after they became law enforcement), and Feeorin—this last race having resided with them for an age before Lord Trayus' devastating attack on their world during the War of Temporal Planes caused them to be sent to the Outer Rim world of Odryn where yet they dwell.

The Kharubdians had since ventured to the many aquatic worlds to seek where they might be of greatest service. Seeing that Kamino needed a protector, Protas had swum into its vast oceans through the large undersea Hypergate—one final use before its destruction. Kamino had not seen much fighting in the old wars, not out of any kindness on the part of the Enemy, but because Melkorr, the mysterious Dark Titan of Bolgen, had claimed it as his own. To the ridge of Thalina in the deepest part of the seas Protas swam to defeat Melkorr, and after six days of fierce combat, he finally did.

The indigenous inhabitants of Kamino were the Aiwha. These were the peaceful offspring of the Oswaft. Although grateful for the intervention of Protas, the Aiwha informed him that they themselves could not engage in violence and must set an example for the Kaminoans, who were their siblings. As one of the Precursors, Protas understood this, although he and his fellow Kharubdians had foresworn the pacifistic course of the Resolute for the ways of the Judicious long ago.

Later, while swimming past the Ancient Trench, Protas was attacked by a vast and vicious school of Kikla. These piranha-like fish had emerged from a hidden atoll to destroy him in retribution for the death of Melkorr. This time, it took Protas a month of fighting until he finally managed to devour every last Kikla. And once again, the Aiwhas had not intervened, explaining again that although they appreciated his guardianship, it was forbidden for them to engage in violence.

When he confronted the Kaminoans as to why *they* did not provide aid, since they certainly were not of the Resolute, their spokesman Kelammar explained. "When first we'd encountered the vast school, our people were frightened by the Kikla who sought to rule Kamino's great seas, and so we opted to allow them to do so."

"You were content enough to have me destroy Melkorr. You should have come to aid me against the Kikla," Protas charged, "instead of selfishly secluding yourselves away while I fought on your behalf."

"And had you perished in the attempt," Kelammar reasoned, "the Kikla would have punished us."

Having no response for this, Protas departed in resentment.

Like lengthening shadows did the years pass into bitter memory, and Protas began to grow old, noting with no small bitterness that the Aiwhas remained perpetually young. By this time, he'd fallen into an abysmal state of brooding from which none of his siblings or allies could lift him from. He turned away from all who tried, and in his hoary and cantankerous final years, he was avoided in turn.

One winter, in the long years of silent peace when new peoples went about hither and thither like schools of roving catfish, a large Aiwha pod approached Protas. They were escorting a vast number of Kaminoans south to escape the coming freeze. Protas refused them passage. The Aiwha did not technically have to ask his permission, as he did not own the waters, but they patiently explained that as Kamino's interstellar gates were long gone, the journey around his domain would prove lengthy and cost innumerable lives. Still, obdurately, he refused.

"Great Protas," the Aiwha named Mawmett addressed him, growing concerned, "we do not wish to inconvenience you or disturb your chosen isolation, but by denying us passage, you are effectually sentencing these people to death."

"They are the Disciples of Melkorr," argued Protas. "I will not kill them, but neither will I aid them."

The Aiwha looked at each other in dismay. "Great Protas," one named Thish replied, "that was ages in the past. None live now who even remember their ancestors, let alone Melkorr."

"*I* remember…"

"We understand your resentment," Mawmett reasoned, "but would you condemn the majority for the actions of the few who are no longer even alive?"

"You are fools if you think their actions were not sanctioned by the majority," Protas charged. "Once the school has been poisoned, from generation to generation will its spawn emerge damaged. You waste your energies on these *Kaminoans*," he added, pronouncing the word as an insult. "Evil is inherent to their nature."

"Respectfully, we disagree," Thish returned. "Every individual has a choice, and for all of the Kaminoans' failings, the Aiwhas yet love them and will not see them perish in so cruel a manner. Nor are you their judge and jury. Please… allow us passage. We will not bother you again in the future."

"This territory is *mine* to guard," he replied crossly. "I am not required by any law to allow lawbreakers to pass."

"To guard, yes. To control like a tyrant, no." When he did not respond, she continued, "Will you have the blood of all these lives on your conscience?"

"I would see the race of Kaminoan traitors dead!"

"This is not the speech of wisdom or compassion but of unyielding rigidity and arrogance," Mawmett rejoined. He looked at Thist, who acknowledged what they both were thinking. Protas had fallen to madness and evil. The Aiwha were left with two terrible options: seeing those they swore to protect die or violently forcing their way past Protas. Finally, they made the decision that forever after changed them. With a telepathic nod amongst themselves, they committed to a hopeless battle against the erstwhile Protector. The winged cetaceans were strangers to combat, and even as they mentally prepared for what they felt had to be done, they detested it. Protas gloated as he saw them fall from their superior position. "You would not put aside your lofty morals to help me defeat Melkorr or the Kikla, but you will to fight *me!*"

"Not to *fight* you, Protas, but to save lives…" Thist returned.

"Will you stop this now and let us pass in peace?" Mawmett all but pleaded.

"I will not! You will have to kill me, for I most certainly will kill you!"

Notwithstanding their lack of experience, the Aiwhas were yet hale, strong, and tenacious, and they were fighting not for pride or dominance but for the lives of their frightened charges. As one, they attacked. Protas laughed as he tore their bodies to pieces and swallowed others whole, but when the tide turned against him and the waters clouded with the darkness of his blood, he began to feel himself die.

"Will you cease now that you are defeated?" the Aiwhas bade him. "We can yet heal you if you…"

"*SILENCE,* accursed offspring of the Oswaft! You and your kind will cease all speech from now to your end!" In this burst of sorrow and wrath, Protas had used what remained of his powers to curse the Aiwha's gift of speech—for their words had made him feel ashamed and enraged. So terrible was this oath, enlarged by the encroachment of his death and the bitter passing of his spirit, it is said to have affected all of the cetaceous children of the Oswaft.

The death of Protas was a grievous moment for the Aiwha who'd been forced to kill Kamino's Protector and one of the Elders of the Firstborn. Furthermore, they could no longer communicate as they once had. As the body of the great Kharubdian dropped to the depths to be fed on by those deep-sea creatures who patrolled the subphotic zone, they put their sorrows aside and ferried the Kaminoans to safety.

Over the long generations, different versions of these events continued to be told by Kaminoans to their younglings. In one longer version, the Aiwha were visited by a Celestial who fortified them and said that their sacrifice had not gone unnoticed and that they would one day speak again.

Although the Kaminoan Jedi Master, Kina Ha, declared these stories to be based in truth, in modern times, nearly all believe them to be fry-and-elver tales, metaphors for the bravery of their steadfast mounts.

THE PROGENITOR'S TALE

Alas that Protas was not the only Kharubdian to fall in relatively peaceful times… During the Indecta Era (17,018 to 15,000 BBY), there came a day when death came to Manaan.

Ancêtre, appropriately called the Progenitor, traveled to Manaan to work alongside emancipated Selkath who had returned to their world in great numbers to begin construction on the capital of Ahto City, which would welcome offworlders and fellow free peoples whom the starward Selkath had befriended. A powerful healing agent known as kolto was harvested not far from Ahto City at a station set up by KoltoCare Therapeutics within the Hrakert Rift deep under the waters of Manaan from which it was to be distributed to ailing nations across the stars.

There had been warnings. Little things. Odd behaviors and strange anomalies.. Some say that the nightmares and disturbing visions that came next were the side-effect of having consumed too much of Ahto City's lum or of the incessant rumblings of the harvesting machine. Others claim it was the occult influence of the Rakatan Star Map installation yet hidden in the oceanic valley. Whatever the case, what *is* known is that over two thousand died that fateful day when the denizens of the dark waters erupted in a tumult to swallow all in its path, all save three….

The station's giant transparisteel viewing decks had been mainly constructed for aesthetic purposes as a way for staff and visitors to enjoy the sweeping, undersea vistas and lifeforms that would occasionally swim by, but they also proved useful in fostering easy communication with the Selkath. There had been a few scares over the years from the rival corporations of Gexin, Pendragon, and Vermogen, as well as Zagoran pirates who wanted to steal the kolto, but few ever got past the Selkath.

Michele Vos was thirteen years old. Her parents worked as phytopharmaceutical scientists for KoltoCare Therapeutics. Following the completion of her assignments, a short time after her parents returned to work in the evenings, Michele would go to Observation Deck 16, which she regularly frequented, to visit with Ancêtre, whom she called Ancé. She looked forward to these visits, as Ancé always had a wise or funny story to relate, and though she often queried Michele as to her own "adventures," there seemed to be no end to the Kharubdian's fascinating tales.

Michele didn't think it odd that she alone could hear her, though it initially proved problematic, as she was told she was "imaginative" and brought under the care of the staff psychologist—a farce that lasted until Michele learned to dissemble and pretend it had all been make-believe, freeing her to go about her business.

"Why can no one else hear you?" she asked the giant being one day.

"When the team that built your shiny cave first swam to these depths…"

"*Station*," Michele corrected.

"Yes, station. They assumed I was one of the hushed ones…"

"An *animal*, you mean?"

"Indeed. My early attempts to communicate were met with… fear and anxiety… so I allowed them to carry on in their belief that I was but a large whale. It mattered

little to me, though I would have enjoyed the dialogue. After the *station* was built and the little spawn arrived…"

"*Children*, you mean."

"Yes, that's it. It was a joy to see all the *children*, but few took the time to sit and listen as you did."

"I knew there were others!" Michele bitterly spat. "They lied and said they never heard you."

"Even amongst the Elder Races were those who had a fear of looking foolish," said Ancêtre. "I have no doubt many of your friends…"

"*Former* friends," she said with a scowl.

"I suspect many of your *former* friends came to believe they had imagined it."

"That's just because they're silly and scared," she concluded.

"Don't be too solid on them," Ancé advised.

"*Hard*, you mean."

"Yes, that is it." Ancé smiled. "It is often *hard* to find good friends, Michele Vos. I am glad of it."

"Me too!" The girl beamed. Maybe Ancé was right. Besides, how many could claim to have a giant talking whale as a friend?

"In time, I hope to introduce you to a new friend I've made. He is very… *shy*, I believe you would say, and shuns the companionship of most. I fear his time in the war has… pained him somehow. But he seems encouraged by my company."

"I'm sure he'll get better," reassured Michele. "Is he as big as you?"

"Oh, much bigger!"

Over the next few weeks, Michele's life proceeded as normal. Then, one night, she had a nightmare, and it recurred every night for the next three nights. Ancé would appear to her at the transparisteel viewport where they often met. Her giant eyes, normally so filled with mirth, were now hooded with fear. She urged Michele to flee, repeating the warning again and again. But she never did. Then, something happened to Ancé's eyes. They shifted, became confused, and then closed. When they reopened, they were black. The Kharubdian opened her mouth wide and screamed. It was a wave of fury and grief that Michele had never before heard and so powerful that it cracked the transparisteel pane that separated the ocean from the station. In the explosion of shards, the frozen waters rushed in… and those black eyes followed. At that point, Michele would awaken.

Sergeant Davon Halidom was Michele's other friend at the facility. He didn't believe in talking whales or dream-visions, but unlike the other guards on Hrakert Station, he didn't mind the company of an imaginative young girl who liked to ask questions. For her part, she liked that he spoke to her like an adult. No one else at the station did. When Michele first told him of her dreams, he ascertained that the recurring nightmares meant *something* and encouraged her to speak to her parents about them. But she already knew where that would lead and told him as much.

When they continued, he took it upon himself to inform her parents. Maybe his timing was off; they were clearly overworked, but to his mind, they were simply

annoyed at what they deemed an embarrassing situation. So it was in no uncertain terms that they informed him that they were perfectly capable of raising their own child, were not to be disturbed on frivolous matters, and that he might find other companionship apart from their daughter. Infuriated at the insinuation, and telling them as much, he stormed out of their office.

Looking to vent, Halidom went to Evlyne Vandor, a marine biologist he'd dated for a time before things ran their course. Evlyne reasoned that they were probably right in that it wasn't his job to worry about the scientists' children. "I'm surprised they didn't blame you for the recent rash of bad dreams people have been having," she laughed.

"I didn't know about that!"

"Wouldn't have mattered if you did." Vander didn't have a high opinion of the Vos parents. "Anyway, the current hypothesis is bad fruit."

"What I mean is… *what* bad dreams?"

She dismissed it with a wave of a hand, "Typical holo fodder, like the junk you'd keep me up watching. Let's see… my last one—"

"You had one too?" Halidom started.

"What's gotten into you, Davon?" When he urged her on, she continued, "Let's see… the station flooded… there were sharks swimming everywhere, eating the staff. I mean… it *was* pretty intense. I hadn't given it much thought until now. Living underwater for long periods of time can have odd effects on us surface-dwellers."

Halidom was not given to superstition, but neither was he closed to the possibility of the uncanny as most on the station were, remembering an odd incident from his youth that had badly frightened him. This recent rash of nightmares didn't feel normal to him. "Do you buy this fruit theory?"

"*Hypothesis*," Vander corrected, "and no, if only because I've been eating canned fruit for over a month. Have you noticed how the prices of fresh oratay and a cup of pulcho have skyrocketed? And, no, I haven't eaten anything too spicy or too late. But I *have* been up late the last few nights looking into an anomaly that the sensors picked up over by Lirmac Cove…" She lowered her voice. "A large gathering of Selkath were seen… *dancing*. At least that's what I suppose you'd call it. You could hear what sounded like tribal drumming, but no one saw any instruments. The habits and culture of the Selkath aren't entirely known to us. A few xenobiologists said it was some kind of religious ceremony."

"That's definitely weird. What do *you* think?" Halidom pressed.

"I thought it was *creepy!* Something in their trancelike movements struck me as… I don't know, disturbing. But that's a *feeling*, not science. Just because something is outside of our cultural norms doesn't make it evil."

"And just because something is unknown doesn't mean it's *not* a threat."

"You've always been a little paranoid, Davon," she teased.

"That's why I'm so good at my job."

"It does account for my strange dreams," she reasoned.

"But not everyone else's," Halidon returned.

The next day, he found Michele and told her to meet him at Observation Deck 16 in the next cycle. Having been none too pleased to be told she was forbidden from seeing him, she nodded, reveling in the small act of rebellion. Halidom arrived five minutes after her and sealed off the deck's entrance. Then, they waited.

The Progenitor made regular rounds to each of the seventy-two main observation decks which allowed visitors to gather during designated periods to see the giant Kharubdian and some of the Selkath. Halidom wasn't yet convinced of the creature's sapience, but it would hardly be the strangest anomaly he'd encountered.

"Have you told Ancêtre your dreams?"

"I meant to… I don't want to hurt her feelings. Besides, my parents and tutor have taken a sudden *interest* in my education and choice of friends. I'm up to my eyeballs in busywork."

Halidom refrained from telling her what he was thinking. *He* wasn't even sure what he was thinking—only that he wanted to speak to her.

No matter how many times one saw it, the arrival of the Kharubdian was always a marvel. For Halidam, it was one of the main highlights of working at Hrakert Station. Michele frowned when she saw her, noting that she didn't have the same jovial look. And her movements seemed subdued… or guarded. She introduced Halidom to her. He was just thinking how cute that was when he heard a deep voice say, "Hello, Sergeant Halidom. I would normally say it is a pleasure to meet you, but I come with dark tidings."

"That's what I was afraid of," Halidom said after gathering his wits. Michele had meanwhile reached out to put her palm on the transparisteel. Ancé closed her eyes and acknowledged the greeting. "I am glad to finally meet you properly as well… but we also have concerns. I'll let your friend tell you."

"What troubles you, Little Fry?" the Progenitor asked.

Michele told her the dreams she'd been having.

"She's not the only one either," Halidom added. "Others have been having similar nightmares. Do you know why that might be?"

The Kharubdian shook her great head in sorrow. "Something is very… *wrong*."

"What's going on?" Michele asked.

"There is something… *dark*… in the oceans of Manaan… with me… with *him*… and all of the Selkath. I think I have made a grave error in judgment. I am uncertain. It feels as if a great abyss has opened below me and the sun has been swallowed above. I do not speak of physical things. But I hear strange music… It unsettles the Selkath. I intend to explore it. Michele Vos, if you are having visions, *listen* to them! I fear something very bad is coming."

"We'll do what we can," Halidom assured her. "Be careful yourself!"

Had they known of the world of Mer and of the Dark Dweller, they would have cautioned the massive Kharubdian to avoid searching any further; they would have told her to flee these waters as quickly as she could with all of her companions and never come back. But they did not know of any such things, for they that reside in the shadow only reveal themselves at the end, and the wars were so very long ago….

Sergeant Halidom knew he was respected on Hrakert Station and that his recommendations would be taken seriously. On the pretext of a hidden leak and the standard policy precautions that had to be taken, he ordered all visitors sent home or to Ahto City until further notice. It was a stop-gap measure at best. Getting the staff and personnel to evacuate would be a whole other matter. Halidom had to create minor damages to back up his claims, but not enough to do any real harm to the station. When that failed to achieve the desired effect, he made up a story of having spotted pirates, but as the Selkath hadn't sounded any warnings themselves, and no one else had seen them, the most they would do was put the station on high alert.

When Michele's parents discovered that the very same Halidom who had been intruding on their daughter's life was now proposing the notion of evacuation, they contacted his senior officer. In the unpleasant exchange that followed, Halidom accused the executives of caring more about profits than safety; it was a poorly-kept secret that most of the kolto was siphoned off to corporations like the Mikkei Combine and other wealthy buyers who fed on the stuff as an anti-aging property and aphrodisiac, leaving only a small percent of what was produced to enter the market as the actual healing agent it was intended to be. With that much profit being gained, Halidom realized he'd been naïve to think there wouldn't be considerable resistance to even a temporary shutdown.

Forced to consider his options, he realized that letting the matter drop was the wisest possible course. The only problem was that Michele's nightmares continued, and Ancêtre told him to take them seriously… *But if Ancêtre could tell everyone, they'd have to believe that something was going on.* Unfortunately, the Kharubdian hadn't been seen since they'd last spoken to her, nor had the Selkath returned for that matter. He couldn't help but feel that things were about to get really bad.

I have to try, he decided. He informed his superiors and chief scientists that the Progenitor was a sapient creature who had recently intuited danger and warned them to evacuate. He was met with laughter at first, but that was followed by angry derision. They threatened to press charges but decided to simply release him from active duty, giving him a day to pack his belongings and depart.

Putting aside his outrage and wounded pride, he reasoned that this would at least give him time to warn as many as he could of the imminent threat. But in the end, no one he reached out to—not even those who'd experienced the nightmares—would pay him any mind. Evelyne Vandor expressed concern, suggesting that an extended holiday would be good for him, but it was clear she felt he'd gone off the deep end.

Early the next morning, Michele arrived packed and ready to go. She'd been forced, after several tears, to make peace with the reality that she would probably never see her parents again. She was even sad for her fellow students, annoying though they'd been, but none of her friends would listen to her either.

They'd just made it to the Aquatic Scout Ship when Vandor arrived with word that Michele's parents had discovered her missing. "Tell me you are not absconding with this *child*, Davon!" she demanded, but it was Michele who explained.

"Every single thing he's told you is true," she said, trying to sound reasonable but only coming across as impatient. "Something *bad* is coming to this station, and if we don't leave now, we're all going to die."

"And you *believe* all this?" she asked Halidom. When he nodded, her eyes widened in anxious disbelief. "And you're just going to take her off-station? Against her parents' wishes? Do you have any *idea* how this looks?"

"I get it, all right? I do. But it's only to Ahto City," he started. "If nothing happens, then of course we'll come back…"

"Where you'll be promptly arrested…"

A loud ringing noise cut her off, unearthly and strange.

"It's *her*!" Michele said forlornly, her face a mask of sorrow. "We have to go!"

"Come with us," Halidom urged, "please!"

"You want me to be an accessory?" she sputtered.

The station made a sudden groaning sound as if some extraordinary force was exerting pressure on it.

"I want you to *live!*" Halidom escorted Michele into the Scout Ship.

"Fine," Vandor relented. "But I'm driving, and—"

She continued to make ultimatums and threats, but her movements were dexterous and brisk as she followed them into the aqua-skimmer and steered it away from the northeast platform where they'd disembarked. Just as they'd gone a short distance from the station, the observation decks on each of the floors began to rupture.

Without thinking, she stopped the skimmer, shocked at the impossibility of what she was seeing. In a matter of seconds, the station was flooding. "Maybe we can still help!" she exclaimed, steering closer.

"Wait!" Michele demanded.

That was when the Selkath appeared. They hadn't come to provide aid as she'd assumed… as she'd hoped. The three sat in silence, watching from the safety of distance as they struggled to process the horror unfolding before them, unable to intervene. Swimming through the corridors with tridents and spears, the Selkath began impaling the fleeing staff and scientists who'd managed to don aqua breathers or breathing suits. Alongside them came the Firaxan and Binexan sharks working in schools as they hunted, ripping apart any and all they encountered. The waters of the flooded station soon turned pitch with the precious fluids of the station's inhabitants.

It was then that they saw *her!* She rose up as an immense shadow, no longer the companion and storyteller Michele once knew. Ancé was gone. In her place was some malevolent and merciless god shoveling people into her mouth by the hundreds…

Vandor heard cries of horror and shock, but they were coming from Halidom and Michele, and she soared on to Ahto City, unable to get the images out of her mind. As she piloted the craft at top speed, she once again heard that strange music from the other night, and the hairs on her arms lifted, but this time she wouldn't stop.

For a long time afterwards, there was no evidence for what had occurred apart from the eyewitness accounts of te three survivors. The Progenitor and the Selkath had vanished and there were no traces of the victims. Michele insisted on speaking to

the newsnets to tell their story. Some assumed it was a means for her to process the grief. It wasn't. She missed her parents, but they'd been disconnected for years. When the anchor asked what she thought killed them, she bluntly replied, "Ideology. Their whole world was science, and that was going to save the world, but it didn't save them or the two thousand souls on that station. I wasn't the only one to have premonitions; I was just one of the few who listened."

Davon Halidom and Evlyne Vandor raised Michele Vos as their own. And as she grew older, she completed her studies and became a teacher of interdisciplinary culture, religion, and myth to help young people comprehend the roots of galactic conflicts in history and provide a greater understanding of the Cosmic Wars beyond the holo-fodder. Her adopted parents supported her as she worked with historians from around the galaxy, Jedi, and others who manifested psi-powers. With a group of likeminded individuals from various races, she helped found the Historical Society that has continued to this day.

Encroachment on the Hrakert Rift became strictly forbidden for a time, but the kolto was too valuable to allow it to go unharvested, and soon enough, Ahto City returned to a thriving metropolis. Only now they kept a reverent distance from their one-time Protector's domain. And now they posted lookouts.

Millennia ebbed and flowed, and old follies drifted in with the rhythm of the cosmic sea. A new Hrakert Station was built on the bones of the old—this time illegally and in secret by the Galactic Republic who'd grown vexed by Manaan's wartime neutrality.

Concerned though the natives were that the intrusion on the Hrakert Rift would spark the wrath of the legendary *mad one* and her murderous guardians, the Republic's black site mercenaries deemed the Selkath stories fables told to keep them on their toes against rival pharmaceutical interests or occupying Sith. So they laughed while the new kolto harvester boomed into the depths.

Yet ever there were whispers and some who said that an unknown entity still dwells in the deepest trenches, exerting a malevolent influence upon all who swim its dark seas, waiting to rise again to devour all who dare enter the accursed waters.

But none know for sure, for the oceans of Manaan keep their secrets.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-TWO

SUZAL AND THE SORCERERS OF RHAND

SINS OF THE FATHER

Suzal Dunbar was a sadist.

In his earliest years, he took pleasure in the abuse and torture of anything smaller than him that he could catch. When that grew stale, he turned his attention to his fellow colonists, a younger brother, whom he repeatedly tormented in ways their parents would never see, and fellow children who had the misfortune of coming across him at the wrong time. They did not fare as well as his brother. The tortured bodies of these poor souls would be found weeks or months later, if at all.

Whether one dwelt amongst the fabulously wealthy, or as the lowly *grotthu* servant caste, or even as the despised, destitute, and dispossessed who hacked and died in the spice-wracked gutters and alleys, life on Rennek was tawdry, desperate, and cheap. Rennek was part of the True Sith Empire and one of the planets within the Red Nebula that wind languidly in the six stellar clusters that are called the Dark Worlds.

The Dark Worlds had once been a looming threat. Were it not for the efforts of the Star Kings of the Mid-Galactic Empire, Thallarna, the capital of the League of Dark Worlds, would have begun to swallow up more and more sectors, as had been the plan of the Lich Lords, but, as they reasoned later from their rotting, samite biers, "It was not the will of the Infernal Star."[204]

Suzal was a product of this world and of a father who held a venomous hate for his eldest son's mischievous, cherubic face, which too closely reminded him of his dead wife and the daughter he'd dishonored and killed during an argument when she'd threatened to expose him. Crime amongst Rennek's nobles was not an uncommon affair, provided that it did not infringe on those of the upper-class as it did in this circumstance. But Bron Ethear Dunbar had gone too far. Aileen had been promised to Mordecai Parsons, the youngest of Rennek's foremost sons. Although a preening, contemptuous brute who would likely have beaten Aileen as well, Mordecai would not allow the dubious death of his fiancée to go uninvestigated and unpunished.

Upon discovering his hand in her death, Bron Dunbar was stripped of rank and privilege. He had money enough left from his late father, Ainsley, to continue living the life of a wealthy and profligate idler but was otherwise excluded from high society and looked down on in scorn, as was the case as well for his sons.

For all his perverse appetites, Suzal was intelligent and well-read. This gave him ideas and ambitions. And as he grew older, he came to better understand the reasons

[204] The attempt to reform the League of Dark Worlds by Count Zarth Arn of Demundia, a descendent of one of the Star Kings, failed when pirates sent by the noble emperor thwarted the fool's efforts.

his family had fallen in prestige and how things would have to change if he was going to make a better life for himself. His brother, Ainsley Jr., had left Rennek long before with no interest in ever seeing his family again. That would make things a little easier. The rest would hinge on his father. That would be harder.

Bron's suite smelled of a potent brew of arrack, wine, and Eassintian Spice from the K'navrel Coast. The stench of Bron was no less noxious from having recently indulged in all three and his refusal to clean up the mess that resulted. His last servant, sick of his hostile advances, left, though not before leaving a wicked scar across his cheek. Suzal had smiled at that, for he well knew how coarse, demeaning, and violent Bron could be. His own proclivities had stemmed from him after all.

When his father stirred from bed with a litany of angry recriminations, Suzal proceeded to beat him. This went on for a time until at last Bron submitted, his life hanging in the balance. Suzal stopped—no difficult thing, he'd been in control the entire time—and tossed the miserable bleeding wreck back on his bed. He then began emptying the current supply of alcohol and costly spice down the 'fresher. Suzal's reputation preceded him so that when he contacted all of his father's suppliers in New Promise's local shops to inform them that intoxicants would no longer be welcomed in his father's home or on his person, they readily complied.

Bron awoke from his stupor, head pounding, face throbbing. Suzal handed him a glass of water, grabbed a chair, and sat before him, patiently waiting for him to show signs of cognizance. "Can you understand me? Or do I need to call a mender?" When Bron shook his head, Suzal proceeded to inform him of the new state of affairs. At the first sign of protest, which came early on, he grabbed him by the collar and drew him near: "Listen to me carefully, old man, because I will not repeat myself. You drove mother to an early grave, murdered your daughter, and made a pariah of our family. You were never anything but a miserable nimgnat. Worse, you've become a cliché! It is over now. You *will* regain the place in society you once had. If you do not, I will simply put an end to your pathetic and unhappy existence. Understand that I fully mean this and that it is no idle threat. You have killed but *one* person. I have killed *many*. It is no great thing to add your name to that list. No one will miss you or inquire after you. Tell me you understand." When his father nodded, he continued. "So here is how things are going to work…"

It took several weeks for Bron to regain his equilibrium, but his son's message had the desired effect. He still hated Suzal, but now he feared him as well. He was younger and stronger, and there was no mistaking his inherent cruelty.

In a matter of months, he'd recovered enough of himself to begin the process of restoring his standing amongst the elite members of society. In one year's time, it was accomplished. The Dunbar clan, although gossiped about, were back in society.

The upper echelons on Rennek had never gotten to know Suzal. Whether due to devoted servants or his own cleverness, his more sinister appetites had been kept hidden. This made his re-establishment in the patrician class easier than he'd expected. He was a mystery to them and something of a novelty, and he knew how to play to both. Where once he'd been seen as morose and peevish, he was now spirited and charming; where once he'd been considered odd and ugly, he was now witty and handsome. It would not be long before he procured a wife.

THAT OLD TIME RELIGION

Koobaree Parsons was not a beautiful woman.

Known in her youth for her mercurial moods and large appetites, she had been passed aside by qualified suitors at a time when other young women her age were being snatched up. Koobaree was just as vain as they, but what she had that those did not was a ruthless resolve that operated behind an avaricious mind. She was, after all, the daughter of Mordecai and granddaughter of Balthasar, and this gave her political clout. For this reason had some deigned to take her hand, but Koobaree had another attribute. She could see through their clumsy ploys, past their coiffured, pampered, and perfumed shells and into their empty, boring, hebetudinous souls. So, she'd rejected them all.

Balthasar had been the youngest of the Sith acolytes of Rennek to make his sojourn to the Nihil Retreat and come back alive… which was in itself an accomplishment. Having been taught from the Kissai Sorcerers on Rhand, he was elevated to join the Council of Enlightened Elders that now ruled Rennek.

At this time, the garishly maned Council of Enlightened Elders rarely left the great edifice that was the Royal Citadel upon Conal Hill. These priests were said to be very old and very powerful, and the Citadel was prohibited to entry save by express invitation—not that many outside of the political circle were anxious to visit. Nor was the Citadel the most accessible of palaces, though couriers and guests made the trip by means of the jowly he-asses that roamed the region.

Conal Hill was surrounded by the Onqan Mountains to the north and the Crusted Pits in the south upon which the coals were kept perennially alit by no living hand. To the west lay Tuqer Desert, into which only fools ventured, for it was said to plague all who walked its sands with ghastly illusions. Far to the east sat Rotland Dump, a toxic waste site outside of which lay the hunting grounds of the Tao'tei Dune Runner, a deadly quadruped commonly referred to as a mutant dog. Rotland had been constructed on the outskirts of the Undercity of Y'ithan, a once-thriving hamlet now haunted by the Ghoulish Ones—roaming corpses of the punished and pathetic who displeased the powers on Rennek, cursed to dream of returning to their good graces until the rot set in.

In Suzal, Koobaree saw a wholly different specimen. He could play the role of an elite well enough, but in his eyes shone a malice that she had only ever seen in her grandfather the times she'd visited him as a child. The impression he'd made on her lingered and propelled her along a path unlike those of her peers.

When Suzal proposed, she knew he was the answer to her darkest prayers.

Religion was generally dismissed by Rennek's nobles, who considered it a parochial leftover of a bygone age, but none dared remove the temples of the ancients. Typhojem yet held the most fascination, particularly amongst youthful males, though a smaller contingent swore by Kopa Khan. One could find temples dedicated to the Night Queen, but they lay in ruins, for her depiction as a spider-queen was considered hideous—a portrayal not helped by the myths which had her battling Ooru the Healer and his noble brothers, Xero the Hero and Kooroo the Sage, the shrines of which still stood.

The Goddess, on the other hand, was perennially popular amongst women young and old. The ancient, pureblooded Priestesses of Tund who'd built her idols had amalgamated aspects of Via, Vahl, and Onrai for her but sagaciously refrained from using those names, fusing instead an ever-youthful figure of duality. As the Dancing Goddess, she was a deity of love and Eternal Grace. As the Lady with the Locust Heart, she was a goddess of war, whose very visage brought death. This gave her wide appeal to the masses on Rennek, especially in her role as the vanquisher of her nemesis, a nameless demon-god known only as the Soulworm who, although a famous figure in the myths, had no shrines. Koobaree loved that Suzal was fascinated by the myths and believed they held power, even if it was the Soulworm that he found the most alluring.

Temples to older and more mysterious gods existed as well at the peak of Conal Hill. Although her lessons spoke highly of these beings, it was her grandfather who had truly awoken her devotion to them when she was but eleven years old. He'd sat beside her, his heavy arm draped around her small shoulders, his breath smelling of cabbage and Kommerken steak. "Papa Balthasar," she'd asked, "what gods do *you* pray to?"

He'd turned his hypnotic gaze upon her and said, "Of the ancient pantheon of Immortal Gods, there are three groups. The Architects and the Great Old Ones, powerful and dominant, comprise seven in all—though some say eight—but only six who are revered. But then there are those older still… nine Outer Gods of unlimited power, and it is to these that we make petition…"

"My tutor called them the Ancient Powers; he said they're very mysterious but must be revered above the others."

"Indeed, they have many names and guises and their true faces are reserved only for the most worthy. They are the Lord of the Worlds, the Lord of Chaos, the Lord of the Abyss, the Lord of Corruption, the Lord of the Dead, the Lord of Deception, the Lord of Demons, and the Lord of the Planes. The Lord of Darkness stands above the others, for he is the first of the Bringers of the Light of Wisdom and from whom are derived the seven sciences, what our ascetic and hypocritical adversaries call *sins*… and for lesser beings, perhaps they are, but for those of us who would be kings and queens, they are the natural states which we strive to master."

"Are the lords not… *slumbering*, as the stories say?"

"They wait for the time the stars are right. Until then, their helpers work to bring about their wishes—the Devourer, the Lord of the Winds, the Dread Mother, the Black Thing, the Demon of Vengeance, and the ascended Ankath—powerful archdemons ready to assist those who are worthy! For it is known that after Bishop Mandible—he is the Transultimate Apostle of the Antisecular Conclave of Clerics—successfully worked the *Mother of Chaos* ritual, Baba…" Seeing the girl's expression, he ceased his oration. "What is the matter, dear child? Tell me."

"I'm… *afraid* of the dark!"

"And well you are to be," he said kindly. "But we do not let fear dominate us. The Way of the Dark is a reality that cannot be ignored or defeated as the advocates of light attempt. We are *of* the shadow… and when the Ancient Ones awaken, as surely they will, they will reward their brave and loyal ones with majesty and dominion! So

take note, my Koobaree—when we pray to such ones, have ready a sacrifice, for it is the blood of the living that they demand."

The marriage of Suzal and Koobaree was a celebrated affair in Hamgra Gorge, New Promise, and Seylind Basin, where some of the wealthiest of the nobles resided. Even the Citadel sent a gift. Koobaree's father, Mordecai, had unsuccessfully attempted a year earlier to end the affair between them. But his illicit dealings and sexual affairs were too well-known to his daughter and fiancée, who promised to expose them if he tried to interfere again. Grudgingly conceding, he went so far as to extend a gesture of friendship towards Bron at the wedding. Later in private, Suzal mocked their family and friends, condemning them as "frauds, fakirs, and dissemblers!" Koobaree laughed. She shared his contempt. And together that very night they made plans…

CHILDREN OF THE DAMNED

Following the birth of their daughter, Chokla, who came two years later, and their son, Mavin, who came four years after her, Suzal and Koobaree started the secret society known as the Five, inviting interested members of the gentry who were known to have an infatuation with occult matters. On Rennek, this was no taboo pursuit. Numerous societies existed that explored all manner of esoteric subjects, with practitioners striving to achieve sufficient mastery for acceptance amongst the ruling elite on Conal Hill, or even better, to be invited as an apprentice by a visiting Sith Lord, though this was considered a pipe dream akin to winning a lottery, as very few in Rennek's history had been called. Of the societies, most were centered on the arrangement of mutual self-interest in which members helped one another gain greater prestige and wealth. Suzal already belonged to several clubs of this kind.

The ancient grimoires that had once been foundational to these societies were looked upon in these days as containing little more than ancestral metaphors, guiding principles for scientific endeavors. One might on occassion perform some minor spell for ceremonial proceedings, lending them an air of mystery and grandeur. As such, the considerable volumes that sat on the library's shelves were covered in dust from long years of unuse. Suzal had already appropriated the most ancient and useful grimoires for his purposes—including the rare and significant *Nineteen Curses,* also known as *The Book of Unspeakable Words*—replacing them with forgeries and works of lesser importance. Having no idea what was in their possession, no one noticed or missed them.

The cult of Five went on to become one of the most popular and exclusive societies on Rennek. Their weekend bacchanalias—hedonistic revelries where all manner of appetites were satisfied—became things of legend; their solstice and equinox rituals were magical spectacles, providing a wonderfully eerie atmosphere that saw greater attendance at each event.

What the public did not know—and would not believe even if they'd been told—was that the four members of the family had spent considerable time and energy becoming proficient in the witchcraft offered in *Unspeakable Words* and other

grimoires. Even Chokla's fiancée, Chell, had to be given several demonstrations before he was convinced that their cantraips weren't mere tricks.

Chell was a high-ranking earl from an old and distinguished lineage. The idea of true power intrigued him as it did all young men of his ilk. Upon their announcement of engagement—after pledging loyalty to the family and answering several of Suzal's questions successfully—he swore an oath to secrecy and was grafted unto the highest level of the cult of Five, which allowed him to learn some limited secrets.

Chell was not one for studying and obtained most of his knowledge from Chokla or Mavin. The young son of Suzal and Koobare thought him a complete dullard and often played wicked pranks on him. Mavin held back for the sake of his sister and parents who wished there to be a fifth member and who knew that the money that Chell brought with him made them the wealthiest family on Rennek. Chell was lucky in this regard, for Mavin was much like his father had been at his age, with death often following in his wake. From Mavin, Chell learned the following:

"The cult of Five was so named for those most ancient of the Lords of Shadow… for according to the legend in the *Liber Ivonis…*" Mavin paused for a moment, pleased with himself at having painstakingly recovered and restored several damaged chapters, "there had been five renegade leaders at the start, later joined by one; these brought together others to take the Dawn World because they would not be followers but masters. Yet, for their fearlessness, they were cast into the depths as resisters and opposers. Agents of Chaos they remain, and their revolution continues to this day. In their honor do we call them forth so that they may return the Cosmos to the Fires of Oblivion from which it will be remade in their image."

"What of us?" asked Chell, suddenly realizing the import of the words and horrified by the prospect. "Are we to go into the fires of oblivion as well?"

Mavin grinned wickedly. "You need not fear, Chell, for the Servants of the Shadow are always rewarded."

Chell wasn't sure what to make of that, but he reasoned that Chokla and her family would never go to all the trouble of serving such ghastly lords if there wasn't a great reward in it. Perhaps he'd be made an emperor and rule a thousand worlds! He would like that. This fantasy impelled him to study the scrolls and become a bit better in the magical arts, which Suzal said would be important in the days ahead.

WE ARE FIVE

It was not long after this that Suzal arrived home in one of his dangerous moods and gathered his family. "The Enlightened Elders dodder in their keep," he announced, "sycophantic vampires basking in the dread glory of the necromancers of Rhand, doing *nothing*! Even the great Sorcerers concern themselves only with the expansion of their hegemony—as if that will matter once the Ancient Ones arise! And all the while they ignore the real threat to that attainment: those self-proclaimed guardians and defenders who will come to wipe us all out, and yet our masters cower like beaten curs in their fortress, having forgotten their power and glory. Forthwith, we must do what they will not!"

"Husband, I am with you to death or glory," stated Koobaree, "but the power of our people was spearheaded by the Old Ones and the Ancient Masters…"

"All true, good wife, but even great Typhojem himself used tools to destroy a Celestial, tools that are yet at our disposal! There is much we must plan!"

By this time, the cult of Five had amassed a massive congregation. With one of the most important holy days, Shamhna, coming up, Suzal declared: "It will begin then!" Each member of the family was given a task. Chell thought his the hardest and suspected Suzal didn't trust him. At first, he was glad he wouldn't be going alone until he discovered it was Mavin who'd be joining him.

The Great Life Jewels were kept as heirlooms in the Royal Citadel, where they sat upon a dais in the aerary, protected by the Citadel Guards and their Tao'tei pets. Suzal had come to believe that these gems would forge open a path through the barrier that kept them imprisoned. Mavin and Chell's job was to take advantage of the distraction Suzal would create to steal them. Suzal didn't tell Chell what the distraction would be, but the young man reasoned that as it was Shamhna, many of the noble houses would be celebrating. Though he didn't dare say it aloud, he would rather be off having fun with them. Still, he comforted himself in the thought that he'd host many such festivities once he was emperor of a thousand worlds. Suzal snapped him out of his reverie, reminding him that he would send a signal to tell them when it was best to enter the Citadel.

Chokla's task was to steal the *Hallowed Destroyer*, a strange and massive vessel that had once belonged to Si'Kranash, the legendary servant of Typhojem and ancient ruler of Rennek who'd started the Council of the Enlightened long ago. It was he who was credited with writing several of their histories. Considered a sacred artifact from the ancient days, the ship was never used and had been regularly guarded for as long as anyone could remember. It was priceless.

It also had a reputation for being haunted.

Over a hundred years earlier, pirates had killed the guards in an attempt to make off with the priceless vessel. The bodies of the would-be thieves were discovered the next morning in charred piles neatly arranged in a triangular pattern with their severed heads piled in the center. It was never discovered who did this or how.

The morning of Shamhna came. After a hasty jaunt on bolotaurs, Mavin and Chell spent a few claustrophobic hours crawling through dim, unlit underground tunnels. There, they waited. The tunnel under Conal Hill had been discovered years earlier. Part of the ancient catacombs, it reached all the way to the wine cellar of the Royal Citadel where bootleggers from ages past had made arrangements with the wine stewards to steal the younger vintages that the royals never drank or noticed. They would then be sold on the black market to the public. The practice was stopped when the stewards were caught and drawn and quartered in the center of each of Rennek's largest cities. The bootleggers suffered a worse fate. While trapped in the tunnels, the Council sent ravenous Dune Runners into it. As Mavin gleefully pointed out, bootlegger bones could still be found strewn about the place. After that, the opening to the cellar was blocked and sealed—not very well, Mavin noted, since he was easily able to reopen and clear it out.

Chell didn't care for small spaces—or boneyards for that matter—but as his fears caused Mavin to laugh derisively and his complaints made him angry (not a good idea at the best of times), he kept quiet and groused in the privacy of his mind.

At last, Mavin heard the signal. It sounded like a common storm to Chell, but as he listened more closely, he could hear this was different. Mavin opened the panel that led up into the cellar. Whatever the noise was, it dimmed to a distant hum in that room, but as they ascended the stairs past the apodyterium and calefactories, he could hear it more clearly. It had a bestial quality but wasn't an animal. When he inquired about it, Mavin just told him to shut up and stay focused.

Where are all the priests? he wondered as they wandered the dim halls and passed by the entrance to the notably empty parecclesion. Paying more attention to the weird howling outside than he was their location, he was startled by the wailing that erupted from the aerary they'd just entered. Before him collapsed the freshly smoking remains of two Citadel Guards. Mavin was grinning from ear to ear. In his left hand, he held an object Chell had only seen a few times before in the grip of Suzal—an obsidian wand. Chell ran to the corner to be sick; when he recovered, Mavin had put the wand away and handed him one of the Great Life Jewels. He was holding the other. It was larger than Chell had imagined and felt funny to the touch.

"The Dune Runners aren't here," Mavin said quickly, "but they could return at any moment. And there are other guards. Stay close, dunce, or I'll do the same to you and tell my sister you didn't make it!"

The crimson jewel continued to pulse in his sweating palm, but there was no time to comment on it, for just as they were leaving the chamber, more guards arrived, and the wicked sound of Dune Runners was not far behind.

Chell ran at a clip, but as he frequently turned to look behind him, he lost sight of Mavin who'd disappeared around a corridor, but whether to the left or right, he didn't know. By the time he reached the path's end, there was no trace of him, and armed guards appeared behind him. In a panic, he fled down the right corridor, toppling into a statue of some obscene creature. The gem flew out of his hand and tumbled back down the hallway from where he'd fled. The tell-tale patter of the Dune Runners made up his mind. He left it behind.

Panting and out of breath, he slowed down only once as he passed one of the Grand Halls—and there the Enlightened Elders were. They didn't see or even notice him. All of their attention was focused on the churning clouds outside. *So the noise must have been from a storm after all, one powerful enough to grab their attention.*

He didn't linger. But upon making it back to the wine cellar, he was gripped by a black force that spun out of the wand in Mavin's hand. It grabbed and lifted him up two feet above the verulium-stone floor. "Pusillanimous *weakling!*" Mavin spat, utter hatred contorting his features. "You had *one* task and couldn't even accomplish that! I should kill you here and now, but I will leave your punishment to father." The boy let him drop and departed back through the tunnel without another word, crawling all the way to the catacombs where the two tethered bolotaurs awaited.

Upon their return to Dunbar Manor and Estate—the site of the great Shamhna Celebration—Chell noticed a massive, gleaming ship on the grounds. It oddly hurt to

look at it, as if it wasn't quite in one place. He'd heard this about the *Hallowed Destroyer*. Compounded with the sound of the howling still in his ears and the fear of what his failure might mean, he turned away.

"Let's go, dunce," Mavin ordered. "You're not leaving my side!"

It was a considerably discomfited Chell who followed Mavin into the strange ship. At the threshold, he spotted a number of figures in the distance walking towards them, stumbling as if drunk, which he figured they probably were. He wished he was. But as they drew nearer, he noted that there was something off about them, unreal even; they looked like shades from the old holos he used to watch. Concluding that the stress of the evening had gotten to him and that it was probably for the best that he was sober after all, he hurriedly entered the ship to find the interior a sight even more spectacular than the Royal Citadel. His astonishment was interrupted by a relieved Chokla. *Did she think I wouldn't return?* Also onboard were a grim-faced Suzal and Koobaree.

"The dolt lost the other jewel!" Mavin was all too quick to report.

Suzal shook his head in consternation, but to Chell's relief, he said, "One should suffice," muttering under his breath about having to make provision for additional safeguards.

"You'd better hope it does," Mavin warned Chell, "or you'll end up like *them*!"

Chell didn't know what he meant by that, feeling only too thankful to be back in Chokla's arms, sipping a delicious and intoxicating green nectar Koobaree had handed them. "I think I've been reading too many of your father's books," he finally said to her as the awesome ship began to rise. "I thought I saw something outside before I came in. And what was that storm? And all that howling?"

Koobaree hooted in her unpleasant, grating way before screeching out: "That was our guests being sucked dry!" Mavin burst as if that had been the funniest thing anyone had ever said.

"But *my family* were amongst the guests," he stated, confounded by her meaning.

"Awww now, don't look like that, dearest Chell," she continued in between guffaws. "It wasn't just them. It was *all* of the noble families. You see, we *needed* them. And now, we get to live forever!" The three cackled again. When even Chokla cracked a smile, Chell began to chuckle too. *It must be a kind of game or hazing ritual*, he thought and promptly forgot about it.

As the ship lifted off Rennek, Chell asked innocently, "Are we taking the *Hallowed Destroyer* somewhere?" He thought himself rather smart for having remembered the ship's name. It would be Mavin who once again brought him crashing back to reality.

"Because you're so stupid and lazy, you won't understand, but the *Hallowed Destroyer* is actually the *Nil-Apharas!*" When Chell looked at him blankly, he turned to his sister: "He's a half-wit! Why do you want to marry a half-wit?" Then, turning back to his sister's uncomfortable fiancée, he added, "It's the ancient ship of *Typhojem*, dummy! It was once used as a focusing rod. The timing has to be right for the spell to work, and it requires a lot of people, which is why we invited all of the noble houses and their servants to the festivities—including your simpering parents and siblings—*over two thousand souls!* Ah, *now* you see it, don't you! Before you start to cry and carry on, let me tell you what my sister's part in the plan was…"

"Mavin, stop!" Chokla demanded, but Koobaree roared. Chell, feeling gutted, couldn't see what was so funny.

"At the same time we'd left for the catacombs, my sister went to see her *friend*, Onan, the Shield-Guard of the *Hallowed Destroyer*. Can you guess how she'd been manipulating him these last few months?"

"That's enough, Mavin!" Chokla yelled.

Sexual mores on Rennek were considerably looser than they were on many other worlds, but Chell still didn't like what Mavin had just insinuated—nor the fact that Chokla had turned redder than the Great Jewels.

Suzal looked up from the grimoire he was diligently studying to finish the story. "Her mission was to ply him and his fellow guards with spiced wine, stolen, of course, from the Royal Citadel, and kill them. Turns out our dear daughter was too soft and only made them sleep temporarily with a simple *dhûlum* spell."

"I'll knock the softness out of you, dearie," Koobaree blared, "just as Suzal will knock the foolishness out of you, boy!"

Chell paled.

"Let me finish, you old cow!" Mavin screamed. She only giggled and made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "Anyway, this ship is supposed to be sentient! So as father and mother led the ceremony, what they were really doing was reading the words of the execration that would steal the essence of our guests, which the ship drew on and distilled into a form we could use!"

"It was a bloody long enchantment," Koobaree complained.

"True, my dear!" Suzal agreed. "That's why we had to use the paralytic agent on them first. You should have seen Mordecai's face!" He grinned, "Priceless!"

"So…" Chell was afraid to say the words. "My parents, my whole family… they're… *dead*?" None of it made sense to him. It couldn't be real. *What monsters would do such a thing? And for what reason?*

"In a manner of speaking," Suzal replied. "In a sense, they'll always be alive in our hearts… and *our organs!*"

Koobaree burst out again, spraying green liquid from her mouth.

"Careful, you stampcrab!" Mavin yelled at her. "That stuff doesn't exactly come easy!" The boy then turned with a wicked leer to Chell. "I don't think he's very happy, father. In fact, dare I say it, I think he's sad. He doesn't even realize that he's drinking their essence right now!"

"Mavin, leave him be!" Chokla chided, but she took the half-emptied glass from Chell's hand before he spilled any of the precious fluid. "You don't have Human feelings. You can't understand." That caused the boy to turn away with a scowl, allowing her to comfort Chell. "It was the necessary last step in the ritual," she explained. "I did tell you to finish reading those chapters. You would have been better prepared."

"Don't mollycoddle him," Suzal ordered sternly. "We are not conventional *Humans* any longer. We are *Five*. We are *true* sorcerers called to a greater purpose."

"You still haven't told us *that* part of your plan," his wife reminded him.

"That, my dearest love, is because I didn't fully know it until I came onboard and was led to this…" Suzal now tore the sheet off of a large adamant crystal.

"What is it?" Koobaree gasped. "It's like diamond!"

"It is called the Soul-Destroyer," Suzal said with a ferocious gleam in his eyes, "the very one wielded by Typhojem himself! It came into the possession of Si'Kranash, who kept it stored aboard this very ship. Together with the Great Life Jewel that I now have to fortify our strength, we are going to bypass the star-stone seal and defeat the greatest opponent of the Ancient Ones, the Guardian of the Light!"

THE HALLOWED DESTROYER

With the power of the Great Life Jewel that had been Carnel coupled with the non-euclidian geometrics of the *Nil-Apharas*, they slipped past the seals of the Unknown Regions. As with many of the ancient vessels from the time before and during the Cosmic Wars, the *Nil-Apharas* was sapient and could understand the commands of its masters. Testing out this theory, Suzal asked the ship if it could hear and speak. When it affirmed that it could, Suzal gave it instructions, "We seek to cause enough damage to draw forth the Celestial, but it must be an out-of-the-way system, as we do not wish to become entangled in events galactic or local and kept from our larger task. So too must we remain anonymous, for it is not yet time to start a war."

It took the ship but a moment to respond: "Varl is now ruled by an independent fiefdom disconnected from the various allegiances that dot this region. Their myths can be used to our advantage. But you must not keep the Life Jewel for very long. Even now I am using power to keep it shielded so that you are not affected by the plague its causes when separated from its counterpart."

Suzal knew all of the extant writings of Si'Kranash, and although uncertain what parts were exaggeration and what parts were true, he had read of this phenomenon.

"How do you know such things?" Mavin demanded of the ship, coming to stand beside his father. "For millennia you sat inert on our world, a fabulous but impotent treasure to be gawked at and fawned over by the descendants of your ancient captain."

The ship was silent, causing Suzal to glower down at his impertinent child, but finally it spoke, "Somatic inertia has no bearing on the matter. From the time of inception my mind has been linked to the inestimable biosphere begotten in Illathurion and connected to the widening energy stream of anima caelum, the darkest part of which now sits at the heart of Nihil."

"Satisfied, son?" Suzal asked, pleased to be in possession of so great a craft.

He wasn't. "If you're *so* intelligent that you can tap into the information substratum of the galaxy, learning what you will, why did you not leave of your own accord?"

"I am not a living being," the ship replied. "I do not have a will of my own save to serve the dark masters who command me."

"Then you are a *perfect* creation," Suzal concluded.

The *Nil-Apharas* emerged as a glowing spot near enough to the sun Ardos. "Feed!" Suzal commanded the ship. To the horror of the Hutts below, it appeared as if Ardos was attacking its lover, the star called Evona, killing her, shrinking her, draining her essence until, shockingly, Evona was dead and the planetary bodies in the system were reacting in accordance.

"*He'll* be here soon enough," announced Suzal with a smile.

It hadn't taken long. Drawn to the pain and suffering in the Force, Wutzek arrived ready to combat whatever was causing the damage to Evona. There, a great cataclysm was unfolding before him, as Ardos—harmed by the destruction of its sister star—was just beginning to expel its gaseous external layers, which would shortly start to cause devastation to the planets in the system, one of which was inhabited.

At last, he spotted the hated *Pale Slayer* glimmering in the sky as if proud of the monstrous thing it had done. He would deal with whoever was onboard soon enough, but first, the Hutts, Rybets, and all the living creatures on these worlds would have to be relocated. The appearance of Wutzek and their instantaneous transportation to nearby Evocar (which they later renamed Nal Hutta), a large planet sparsely populated by the near-Human Evocii, was of tremendous shock to the Hutts, who interpreted their salvation in an odd way, for Wutzek never got the opportunity to speak with them as he'd intended. Thus the Hutts came to believe that due to their survival of the cataclysm, they'd been elevated by the gods to the status of demigods.

Before the oppressors could escape, Wutzek arrested the flight of the ancient vessel of Typhojem, recalling how that malignant entity had succeeded once in killing him. That being was long gone, not that it would matter; were his prototype himself awake and wielding the very same gems and powers at his disposal, he would live, for Wutzek could not be destroyed. He drew near to the *Nil-Apharas*.

But while the Soul-Destroyer could not harm him, when used in tandem with a vital conjuration and the pull of the *Hallowed Destroyer* generating a black hole where Evona had once been, it *could* ensnare him in an Anti-Force Void just as the soul-snares and angle-traps of old had ensnared other potent spirits.

Incredulously, inexorably, Wutzek was pulled into the ship just as the spirits of the Rennek nobles had been, for the Anti-Force Void worked strongest on Force-embued beings. There, the adamant crystal acted as a cage. Upon seeing that the dancing agglomeration of lights that was Wutzek could not escape, Suzal and his family shouted in loud, triumphant voices, congratulating one another on their success. Even Mavin was in good spirits, commending Chell on a job well done.

"What is your name, elder-demon?"

"If you do not release me, for you my name will be Death!"

"Haha! Clever! I like him," Koobaree exclaimed with glee.

"Ship, what kind of fish have we caught today?" Suzal inquired.

"Of old, he was known by several variant names. But amongst his allies, he is called Wutzek."

"Indeed? A most curious being of which our books are not in agreement. Many say he is on the side of the Ancient Ones, but others that he is their sworn enemy. I suppose we know the truth. Mavin, you will fashion new history books! But now we must return what we have taken," Suzal announced exultantly. "Then very soon, we will watch a Celestial *die… again*!"

Chell could not have known that when he'd earlier lost Cornus the Great Life Jewel, its companion, Carnel, had begun to scream. Although the spirits of the crystals were long gone, what was left behind was a sentient remnant that knew only that it

would not tolerate separation from its bonded companion. As a result of this, Xaczhick, Rhand, Rennek, and numerous worlds behind the Red Nebula in the heart of True Sith territory came under meteor bombardment, catalyzed by the *azreth angjen* and *derriph midwan* rituals the Five had used on the nobles of Rennek.[205]

Suzal was tempted to let them all perish. It would serve them right, but it would harm the goals he'd set out to achieve. Besides this, he was looking forward to rubbing his accomplishments and powers in the faces of the slothful priests.

Thankfully, the Royal Citadel still stood, with only minor damage to the building. He was not thwarted along the journey, though the interior lay in an atramentous murk lit only by a few candles. He entered the aerary quietly, discerning that something wasn't quite right but unable to get a full picture. Upon replacing the gem on its dais next to the one his son-in-law had foolishly let go of, the meteor barrage stopped.

That was when the room lit up with a rutilant light. From the crimson tegument, three Sorcerers of Rhand emerged. He hadn't noticed them before, or the corpses of the Enlightened Elders that lay at their feet, punished for their failure in guarding the prized jewels. He recoiled instinctively. *What horror is this?* The Rhandites were far more awful than he'd imagined. Regaled in daunting royal garb, they were little more than animated corpses with ghastly vermilion orbs.

It has to be a holographic illusion… Then they began to murmur in a hateful tone.

"In all these years, you, Son of Bron, are the first to show the initiative that the Way of the Dark demands," croaked a crowned king with a cowled face of darkness.

"And to ensnare the Beyond One! That is no small feat!" said another skeletal creature with protruding horns. "You hold the key and the gate!"

The third stepped forward, a terrible, ruined thing wielding a wicked iron claw upon a six-foot pole. "Unshackle our Eldritch Masters and join our ranks—but be wary, for the Elder Gods are tricky and wield secrets you do not yet know!"

"What do I not know, exactly?" Suzal demanded, staunchly refusing to show fear, though his voice betrayed it.

"Only a smattering of ancient knowledge is concealed in the castles of this world," said the first of the crowned Lich Lords, grinning hideously. "If you prove wise, mayhaps you will take the Black Pilgrimage and come to the great acropolis in the unlighted depths of distant Rhand, the Temple of Darkness, conserved for but the worthiest of acolytes who have passed the fiery gorges of Bis; there you may traipse the haunted wilderness of Sinn, where the sanguivorous shades creep and the Infernal Star gleams, and so peruse the colossal Library of Zimimar to converse with the primordial Warders of Knowledge who endlessly read the nine Forbidden Books with eyes that never shut."

Upon seeing the look upon his face, the horned skull-face added, "We have waited for one such as you for a long time to aid us in solving the Riddle of the Dark, for the role you must play will the gods grant you a throne besides us in the deepest Abyss"

"Ah! He doubts and wonders why *we* did not proceed as he had," rasped the third armored skeleton-thing. "You still have much to learn!"

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[205] *Azreth angjen* is the spell known as *waves of darkness*.

How does it even speak? His skull barely holds the remnants of a tongue.

"Leave us, Suzal Dunbar," the three Anzath commanded. "*Open the gates!*"

"I will achieve this great honor," Suzal said fiercely, knowing that such ones would tolerate no fear or timidity, "and release the Ancient Ones! I will feed them with the Light of a Celestial!"

He'd been hoping for silent esteem or even faint praise, but only murmuring followed. "Beware of hubris!" warned the grisly, hooded spirit who now glared upon him with eyes of fire, "for the Opener of the Way is also a seal unto himself!"

"I do not know what lies ahead, but I will return when it is done!"

But as he turned to depart, again the hateful murmuring sounded, and as the three Sorcerers of Rhand vanished into the gloom, disappearing entirely, he heard one say, "You will never see this world again…."

Suzal did not speak or stop to answer his family's question, and they knew from his grim visage better than to press the matter. The *Nil-Apharas* was the most potent ship in the galaxy, and under its direction, they sped to the black heart of the Unknown Regions, the inmost part of the bleeding, crimson nebula of Perann and the gulping rift of Valtaullu littered with the ruins of ancient stellar spires and fleets of decaying ships. Beyond this was the frozen gloom wherein lay the heart of the True Sith's dread empire, the Immortal Gods of the Sith, turning in twisted bonds of space-time.

Wutzek remained silent throughout. So, the thrice-uttered curse of Tilotny had come to pass. So be it. He was a Celestial and had been in far worse situations before. He would bear whatever would come. Or so he thought.

It was at this time that he heard the call of Belot. In desperation he sought to break his bonds, but the Soul-Destroyer well served as a powerful angle-trap (or "*angel trap,*" as Mavin liked to call it). *Why did I not visit her earlier*? He said in self-recrimination. *Why did she wait so long to call upon me? Why did these base creatures have to imprison me now?* There was nothing to be done but send up a silent supplication.

As if in response, he felt a deep connection to the winding, coiling cosmological knots his fellow Celestials had wreathed in this realm—and strength infused him. The *Hallowed Destroyer* suddenly let out an anguished roar. Threading the rolling, scattered black orbs of dead and dying worlds towards the Gunninga Gap wherein the Eldritch Ones writhed in frozen terror, the ship and all its occupants began to slow down in time. Wutzek allowed himself a laugh. The ship had never before encountered such an impediment, and though it had fully expected to thread the needle, it could not, and Suzal realized too late that he'd been caught by Wutzek in the idiosyncratic snare of the inimitable singularity the Celestials had woven!

Belot, meanwhile, had brooded and seethed in her imprisonment long enough, and those few that found their way to Vitae did not come away unscathed, if they came away at all. The Thuruht hive would be tasked by the Son and Daughter to rebuild Belot's prison, but she escaped more than once in the Kymoodon and following eras, at which times the Firstborn would help in containing her… but with the passage of the ages, the greater part of their powers were spent and faded, and in each case had she grown more terrible and mad, and they were left with but a faint hope that galactic war would not be reignited to break her bonds or that the Celestials would return.

ENLIGHTENED SOULS

An epoch would pass before the Five found themselves released, during which time many strange and eventful things had occurred in the galaxy.

"How long have we been here?" Suzal asked of the others, who slowly awoke as if from a drunken stupor. It was Koobaree who suggested that they ask the ship.

"Impossible to know," the ship responded. "The stars do not behave as they should. I surmise it is well over ten millennia—"

"*Over ten millennia!*" exclaimed Mavin as the others looked on in horrified dismay.

"We haven't aged," noted Chokla, gazing worriedly into a mirror.

The ship explained. "Caught in the cosmic oubliette prepared by the Elder Gods for the Ancient Ones within the knots of the distorted space-time continuum, no time has passed for us. You are fortunate that the outskirts of the region have come undone."

"What is done is done," Suzal declared. "We need the Great Life Jewels to depart the seals placed on this realm. Can you aid me in retrieving them?"

"They are no longer on Rennek."

"What?!" he growled. "How do you know?"

"Though we have been frozen in time, my mind was able to penetrate and wander the dense Darkness. It speaks to me as I speak to it…"

"That is something, at least!" Suzal reckoned. "The Jewels must have been taken by the Anzath!"

"No. Sephi Shield-Guards came and stole the Great Life Jewels from Rennek. They lie in a temple on Xaczhick where a powerful Sephi priesthood guards them against those who follow the Way of the Dark. At this time, few can overcome they who have been empowered by the almandine Jewels, for the priests have come to learn that the separation of the gems results in not only cosmic ruin from without but a terrible plague from within. They call it the Crimson Forever. But you do not need them."

"Explain."

"The seals were first weakened by one called Darth Nihilus. It has taken me many years, and although most cannot yet depart this realm, *I* at last *can*."

"So we can go home?" Chokla asked with no small hope. Her mother smiled in assent, and even Chell seemed enthused by the idea.

"You can never return to Rennek," the ship told them. "The spirits of those you'd murdered endure on that world as Revenants, and though they remember little, *you* will be hunted with a black hatred in their spectral hearts and utterly destroyed."

Suzal sighed outwardly, but his anger blazed. Turning to his scrolls in order to find a new home, he was dismayed to discover the pages had decayed while they'd been trapped like insects in amber. "I'm sorry, dear," he said, grabbing Kobaree's hand and squeezed. The others, save Mavin who did not care either way, looked on in disappointment. Then Suzal asked, "What has become of this *Darth*?"

"Destroyed," the ship replied. "A new line of Darths has begun, inaugurated by one who has betrayed the thousands of Stygian Sith before him in order to adopt a new ideology known as the Rule of Two, one master to wield power and one acolyte to crave it. In this way do they believe they will ascend to mastery of the galaxy. As

to the True Sith, they are yet in the Shadow Worlds manipulating events from afar, awaiting the awakening of the Ancient Ones. *This remains our mission!*"

"I agree. It is pointless to spend our days amongst ghost-kings. Nor do I think we should interfere with these lesser *masters* and his apprentices. But to forge our path, we need not only to replenish our stock else we will rapidly grow old and die, but we must find the means of circumventing the seals."

"Understood." The ship took them to the wretched spot where the two realms overlapped—the hateful and hungry eater of space called the Hellhoop of Attahox. Through it, they entered. "Typhojem had procured the means of traversing the realms. Most are no more, but in Illathurion you may find other means and ways." As they gazed upon the utterly alien realm in wonder, the ship saw fit to warn them: "We cannot linger long, however, for it belongs now to those who despised my original master. Nevertheless, I have led you to that which may preserve your unnatural lives."

"*May* preserve," Koobaree spat. "You'll have to do better than that!"

"There are few options left to you. This is the best that I can calculate."

"Fine. What do we need to know?" asked Suzal.

"The being you are about to encounter may decide it is better to consume you, but that will prove difficult, for I was built to withstand such things."

"Then there shouldn't be a problem."

"It has been long since last I espied it," the ship added. "It will have grown *larger*."

The moment they passed through the portal, the *Nil-Apharas* took them past the hulks of dozens of destroyed craft down to the nearest body, a heaving and nidorous mass covered by a rippling sea of feelers and an undulating dermis. As they drew nearer, they looked on in horror as hundreds of eyes and mouths puckered open and shut.

"We should not be here!" sputtered Chell, holding back his urge to retch, which proved unsuccessful.

"Maybe not, but it is *magnificent!*" Mavin said, awestruck.

"He certainly looks hungry," Koobaree said more quietly than usual.

"What kind of creature is it?" Chokla asked.

"None now know," the ship replied. "It is a nameless evil that the beings of this realm refer to as the Void-Horror. Some believe it is one of the Titans of old, while others speak of it as a deformed and nameless brood of Ooradryl prophesied to devour the galaxy; some yet say it is the eldest of the Soulworms, or the Sovereign Sarlacc, mother of all Sarlaccs, Vixus, Blixii, and more. Still others dismiss it as a Silan diseased from young by the spore of Mnggal-Mnggal. But the darkest whispers tell of one called Abhoth, the Source of all Uncleanness and progenitor of the Cancer God. Ancient legend suggests that his forebear was a Celestial so weighed down by hate and guilt that he morphed into the charnel god of fools. Perhaps this is even he…"

"Fascinating," mused Suzal. "Why fools?"

"Because all who come here never return."

"Can we speak with it?" asked Maven. "Does it even have a language?"

"We know all tongues!" thrummed a heavy and loud voice that rumbled throughout the ship. "Have you come to bring us your essence, to sacrifice yourselves to one worthy of such tenderly bedarkened spirits? I can feel the souls of many within you! Know that I will much enjoy feasting upon you!"

Several tentacles shot up to wrap themselves around the ship, but the *Nil-Apharas* had known this would happen and easily shifted out of reach. A low roar sounded in protest. Suzal had long ago learned how to pacify the powerful. "Do not be angry, O great god of Illathurion, for we have come with a thing far greater than our meager selves."

"No!" the entity bellowed. "We cannot feast on the Beyond One, on *Iog-Zetok!* You know not what you've done! Never should you have brought the Lurker here, for he will swallow us all in oblivion! " At that, the entity began to rant on about guardians and gates and omnipotent ones.

"Do not fear," reasoned Suzal. "He is *well* secured! How else do you think we are in command? Forget this demon! I have another offer that will please you better. Our own essence will satisfy you for but a short time. We can ensure that you dine on a more… *regular schedule*."

"How can mere *Humans* do all this? I sense that you want something in return."

"Indeed, for it is said you feast only on fools—and we are not *fools*." Suzal shot Mavin a severe look as the boy began to mouth, *not all of us*. "You know this ship," Suzal continued congenially. "You've seen it before. It serves us on a special mission for the Ancient Ones. But first we must procure a home and the extension of our lives—both of which, in your great abundance, you can provide. We will use this ship to lure fools into your great maw. We will bring in this harvest once each season during the course of a standard year, enough to keep you sated but not too much that we cannot do our own work. In exchange, we will dwell aboard this ship, coming and going as we please. When in your realm, you will allow us to siphon some of the excess life-force that you have stored so that we may live on, ever as fellow servants of the Powers."

"So shall it be," the entity replied greedily. "If you do not meet these criteria, however, I will see to it that you are digested over the course of many millennia!"

Wutzek listened with growing disquiet but otherwise remained silent. *How had this abomination escaped our notice? No doubt it had hidden well from us. I will likely have time to discover more*, he thought mordantly.

At this time, he received a vision. It showed him the passing of the Celestials, the fall of the Ones, and the rise of the Jedi Order. "Am I to be freed to join my brethren?"

"Not yet," a voice in the vision stated. "Your mission remains where you are."

Wutzek would only much later come to understand this. Proximity to the Void-Horror caused the worst aspects of Suzal's nature to reassert themselves and spread like a contagion to all of the family—particularly Koobaree and Mavin. Wutzek had some small success in communing with Chokla and Chell, but only for a short time before they were broken by the other three in ways too awful to enumerate. Though they never sank to the level of sadism that the rest had, they eventually succumbed to evil.

As victims were collected, tortured, and sacrificed to the Void-Horror and other gods that Suzal and his twisted clan had come to serve, Wutzek mitigated the suffering of all but the truly reprehensible (Attahox tended to attract negative energies), keeping their spirits safe and warm and preventing them from being devoured by the Void-Horror, who was so glutted and wicked, he could not discern that the energy he fed on was generated by Wutzek in their place. This came at a cost, as Wutzek had to absorb their suffering into himself, though he learned to manage it.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-THREE

KINGDOM OF NIGHTMARE

From the end of the Indecta Period to the Kymoodan Era (15,000 to 11,987 BBY) rose the Hutt Empire and two others that would play a large role in modern history: the Yevethan Hegemony and the Yuuzhan Vong…

THE YEVETHAN HEGEMONY

While many civilizations held to nonjudgmental and cosmopolitan views on cross-species liaisons, particularly those worlds that belonged to the Galactic Republic, there were those who scapegoated mixed races as mongrels who caused trouble and war, forcing a number to carry out their affairs in secret or face discrimination in places where interspecies relations were taboo or where they were persecuted for having miscegenetic ancestry. The types of xenophobia differed on different worlds with varied expressions of anti-alien and anti-Human sentiments. And this was not helped by the spreading stories of near-Human marauders and monsters, including that of the so-called "Force Eaters."

The Stennes Shifters were the product of dark science intended to overcome death. From Eton Tower in Thuringia, located in the Province of Dippel on Stennaros, Ossian biologist Doctor Palatinate performed a series of trials on his test subject, Percy, who he nicknamed "the Terminal Man." Percy had been a near-Human Stennes who had only recently expired. Although his resurrection was deemed a success, with the telepathic ability of the Stennes preserved—a byproduct of the Givin-Human hybridization that produced the Stennes—Percy's post-death disposition had proved hostile. This called for a second procedure, a companion who might soothe his savage nature.

For all the horror that Palatinate's acts produced, "the tragedy," according to the records of the Florescucorp pharmaceutical company that funded his research, "was the escape of the two creatures who had, impossibly, managed to produce offspring." Hoping to get them back in custody, Florescucorp spread rumors of frightening and dangerous "Force Eaters"! This led not only to the persecution of Stennes Shifters but of Stennes themselves, as the two could not be distinguished by their violent persecutors.

Exploiting these attitudes, the Yevethan Hegemony inaugurated a pogrom to wipe the galaxy of the "abomination of miscegenation," which was claimed to have been the cause of the Cosmic Wars, and sent out allies who agreed with their views along with scores of Siringana to planets that housed Human hybrids.

In response, the Galactic Republic spoke out against anti-miscegenic policies, but the Yevetha sagaciously avoided engagements in the Core and Inner Rim, as a war with the Republic was one they knew they could not win. So, they focused instead on demonizing the Republic and gathering support in the Outer Rim and regions where heterogeneous peoples were rare and mixed-species marriages were either illegal or considered disloyal or foul.

But these places were not without succor. On trade worlds across the galaxy, from Bazarre to Tirahn, and any world from which news was disseminated in this era, as well as from the Dradan missionaries who traveled the spacelanes, the call was sent out by several that any refugees who wished to intermarry could do so in their lands. But it was with the Mooloolians of Janguine that the following disparate peoples joined together. Besides Humans, Galandan, and Boltrunians, there were found:

> Chev—near-Humans from Vinsoth who were sold out to the Yevetha by the Chevin, who coveted the world for themselves;
>
> Shaull—near-Human Lowen from Low'n who'd grown tired of fighting an on-going war with the domineering Romin, changed their names, and left Low'n to search of a new life;
>
> Tarro—a humanoid race disgruntled by the parochial and hostile attitudes of their people on Tililix who longed for a less inimical environment;
>
> Sanyassans—a controversial inclusion, these prisoners had recently escaped Sanyassa IV during an engagement with the Yevetha; their crime: consorting with the opposition;
>
> Even some Yevetha were present, those who'd been caught showing mercy to their Vodran or Sanyassan adversaries or mating with either.

The newcomers were grateful to the Mooloolians who helped them established new homes. In turn, they adopted the Janguine tongue as their own. In a relatively short time, they felt settled and safe, and some began to explore their jungle world, with excursions led by a Tarro-Shaull team of archaeologists. The Mooloolians did not know much of the history of the ancient stone temples and ruins that were found amidst the rainforests or mountaintops of Sanxuneta, having arrived after the Sith were driven from Janguine, but they warned them to leave untouched any artifacts and manuscripts they might uncover, as they believed them to be cursed items that would bring doom on their heads.

To the credit of the explorers, they shared whatever profits they'd gained from the sold treasures they uncovered with the Mooloolians.

Their advice, however, was not always heeded…

THE RETURN OF AERIMUS

The living planet, Aerimus, the benevolent offspring of Cold Danda Sine, had experienced several fascinating adventures over the long years and accomplished much good in that time. He had never seen the war-fleet of the Hegemony before, but he recognized the tell-tale signs of those who served the Enemy, and it was not hard to discern the intent of the fiendish Yevethan ships massing at Janguine. Aerimus had not taken part in the prior wars, but he staunchly opposed all who indiscriminately brought harm to a living ecosystem.

As the onrushing planet came into view, drawing rapidly nearer at a rate believed impossible for a heavenly body, the captains of the Yevethan fleet took evasive maneuvers until finally they made the jump into Hyperspace. But Hyperspace was no great obstacle to one such as he, and Aerimus followed them to N'Zoth where he proceeded, with a violent but precise expulsion of igneous fireballs, to destroy all of their shipyards, thereby ending their ability to leave their world. He then returned to Janguine and reached out telepathically to its ethnically-diverse peoples.

Communication was initially tentative, but he used moving pictures, showing them images of himself, their planet, and the Yevethan craft that he'd destroyed on N'Zoth. Soon enough, he picked up their language and learned that they were made up of various species of Humans, near-Humans, and non-Humans who had gathered to live freely in cross-species relations. Aerimus listened with fascination to the tales these grateful people told and felt sympathetic towards their plight. He'd long traveled the cosmos in search of another like him, but if there were any similar beings out there, they'd eluded him. Thinking it aught to be good to settle down in a peaceful place alongside companions with whom he could give of himself, he invited the persecuted peoples of Janguine to come live upon his surface.

The Janguine discussed the matter and took a vote. Most agreed to depart with him in order to spare the Mooloolians from the wrath of Yevethan allies, for the Yevetha had hardly been alone in persecuting near-Humans and hybrids. Of the mixed Mooloolian races, a few would join the Janguine while the rest would remain and set up homes in the deep mountain passes and tangle of jungles, which few would be able to find them if they didn't wish it. Should any hunters arrive to inquire after them, the pureblood Mooloolians would simply state that they knew nothing of offworlders.

Disembarking on the lush-green surface of Aerimus, the Janguine were surprised to find so paradisaic a terrene. Even more surprising was the greeting party of domesticated but strange beasts made up of species they'd never before seen. These creatures led them to a large fissure that opened upon a hillock. Its uncanny resemblance to a yawning mouth was further fixed by the musical greetings of Aerimus, who explained that he'd fashioned a means by which he could speak more comfortably with them, utilizing the deep cave as a throat through which he could pass wind as breath, a large thick-leafed tree rooted in the cave's base as a tongue, and giant mushrooms that he'd grown over the edge of the cave's entrance as lips. He arranged three of these throughout the continent upon which they came to dwell.

Before departing, he asked that they first agree to a Covenant of Peace which would bind them to each another and to him as family. For their part, they asked that he not communicate telepathically with them, which they found disconcerting, but solely through the designated cavemouths. The Covenant was then agreed upon by both parties, and they were renamed the Aerimal. In the Janguine tongue, the descendents of this people would rename him Yuuzhan'tar, but that was yet long years ahead.

Placing an ice barrier around the world so as to protect them from the rigors of Hyperspace, he took them to the less-populated dwarf galaxies, settling at last within Yammsara. Although other peoples dwelt there, including some who'd sought to make their homes far from the wars that had afflicted the galaxy, there was yet plenty of room to grow. And grow they did. Aerimus was patient as they became accustomed to their new life. And he was generous with all of his resources, aiding them in the construction of beautiful homes and palatial buildings of varying kinds.

Ages would pass, and those who would come to be known as the Yuuzhan Vong considered themselves the Chosen Race, spreading civilization upon the many unspoilt worlds that floated in tranquility in the vastness of their new galaxy. But as time would tell, peace was a principle that one must be watchful to protect, for it is easily robbed, sometimes by dark forces without and sometimes from the shadow within.

THE WAR OF ABOMINATIUM

It had gone on for centuries, gradually but steadily, and unnoticed until the time it was realized that an alarming depletion of the mineral wealth of Yammsara had occurred. Now that they knew, they dispatched sentries to watch and wait. Then, at long last, the vigilant Silentium discovered the hidden refuge of their ancient rivals concealed within the adytum of a forlorn system wherein they had been building their numbers in secret.

The Abominor at last were found!

Knowing the massive robot ravagers could never again be allowed to spread into the galaxy, the Silentium made with haste, mobilizing their fleet and descending like locusts onto the secret Abominor base. But the droid armies of the Abominor had grown vaster than they'd suspected, nor was this their only harbor.

And they had allies.

In recent years, they'd forged a pact with the telepathic, cyborg Zoromes of Zor. In youth, Zoromes placed their brains inside metal cubic bodies upheld by four jointed legs; six metal tentacles and a metal head comprised their upper limbs. Some augmented their bodies with additional tentacles or wings. They were not an evil race, but having earlier fallen under the mind-control of the evil Emkl Phantoms of Trulfk in Illathurion, they believed the robotic Abominor to be their natural allies and were persuaded by them that it was in the best interests of all organic races to follow their lead and replace their flesh bodies with mechanical ones—*whether they wanted to or not*.[206]

[206] One Human underwent this process when his comatose body, floating in a rocket in space, was taken and revivified by the Zoromes in their galaxy.

The Children of Aerimus were at the time of this conflict spread out upon many worlds and unable to depart for another galaxy, but escape was not their intent… Aerimus deferred to their wishes to save Yammsara from the existential menace, offering them more in the way of biotechnological secrets with which they could utilize their world's powerful, organic processes to defend themselves and the other races who chose to remain and fight.

While the opposing forces—mammoth, fiendishly armed, and undaunted—exploded in an astral blitz that proliferated far and wide across Companion Cresh, the Aerimal began rapidly growing and shaping hybrid mecho-organic ships using the biotech Aerimus had taught them. This proved successful at first, but as the war grew in ferocity and they saw their cousins on various worlds targeted by the unfeeling armies of the Abominor, the appointed leaders of the Aerimal began to argue that their meager weaponry was not enough. To win the War of Abominatium, as they'd coined it, they needed to utterly destroy the Abominor.

Aerimus felt uncertain about this course and spoke to the Silentium, who acknowledged that though they'd not asked for the assistance, they were glad for it, stressing that the Abominor were nothing short of mechanized devils in the most literal sense who would wreak havoc on the universe if allowed to continue harvesting resources and expanding. But what most concerned Aerimus was the effect this kind of prolonged combat was having on his people, who were already beginning to succumb to an altered mental and spiritual state, becoming wrathful, inflexible, and unmerciful as the battles raged on and the body counts continued to rise. Even their social structure and nomenclature were being reorganized to reflect militaristic objectives. Clans were restructured into Domains. Social groupings were divided into a hierarchy under the Great Council with castes that were arranged as follows:

Intendant, for political members of the council;
Warrior, for the members of the military;
Shaper, for the scientists who worked with Aerimus;
Worker, for everyone not part of the above three castes.

Given that they'd been visiting and asking advice from him far less frequently than before, Aerimus feared that this was just the beginning of a dangerous trend, and it was not long before he received confirmation that his qualms were justified.

APOSTATES OF THE GREAT COUNCIL

Having grown impatient with Aerimus' sluggish deliberations, the Great Council begun seeking out alternatives. Presently, they were approached by a Worker named Yuwlarr Roth, heir to a line of historians and scientists begotten by the two Tarro-Shaull archaeologists who'd spent the better part of their years on Janguine delving into the ancient ruins of Sanxuneta.

The archaeologist team had kept some of their recovered material concealed, not wishing to jeopardize their home or reputation, given the Mooloolian ban on the acquisition of Sith artifacts and books. But the discovery of the priceless *Thothnych Manuscript,* one of the nine Forbidden Books of the Ethereal, could not simply be ignored or left behind. So it had been passed down, with each subsequent generation vowing to keep secret the existence of the text until such a time came for it to be safely placed in a museum or sold to a private collector if the need arose.

"Even if what you tell us is true, why bring this heirloom to us?" asked Intendant Steng, carefully scrutinizing the bloodstained pages. Although the members of the Great Council were intended to govern as an equal body, Intendant Steng was more and more looked upon as their leader, much to the irritation of General Yo'gand. "We are not archivists or collectors. Perhaps in the old galaxy, we might sell it and use the profits to afford mercenaries or weapons to throw against the mechanical monstrosities who every day come closer to wiping us out, but we are a long way from there."

"It is no mere *book*," explained Roth. "It contains power…"

"What manner of power?" Steng inquired, keeping his tone even. He had misgivings about this ancient relic, but he wanted to hear what Roth believed.

"The power to summon primeval forces who will serve us."

"This is nonsense," scoffed General Yo'gand, causing the others to laugh as well.

"I assure you it is not," Roth insisted.

"Even if it is real, which I highly doubt," Yo'gand rebutted, "so evil a thing would only spell doom for our people."

"How many Domains have to perish before you realize we are *already* doomed?" demanded Intendant Shul, eager to try anything that might assist them.

"What guarantee do we have that we would even be in control of such forces?" asked Intendant Kwaad. "Once unleashed, they might just as easily turn on us as on our adversaries…"

"With respect, *Intendants*," interjected Roth, "I have studied the book for some time. The text delineates which beings can be controlled and how. You say we need resources to win this war. I can think of no better."

"I do not recognize your surname. To what Domain do you belong?" It was assumed that Intendant Steng had asked this as a prelude to dismissing Roth.

"My mother was Y'dann; my father was Gefin. The Roth clan was considered too small to have been granted its own Domain, and we were adopted into Domain Shai."

"Very good, Yuwlar-Roth Shai, let us see what you can teach us…"

Once he learned of it, Aerimus spoke out against having anything to do with this cryptic text, to which they replied that he need only provide them with greater weapons. Offended that they should attempt to force his hand in this way, he refused. So it was that against his grave warnings, they studied and recited the words of the runes that they believed would bring them a quick victory.

Living Fires, Shadow Spirits, and Black Mists seethed forth, and from the sepulchral depths of the forsaking void did the Great Council come to the attention of those whom they would later deify as Yun-Yammka, the Slayer and God of War, and

Yun-Harla, the Cloaked One and Goddess of Deception. Subsequently, those of the Shaper Caste were taught new ways of waging war and harnessing powers that would amplify every aspect of their society, especially the alchemical arts of transforming the biotech of Aerimus into deadly bioweapons and, worse, harvesting the beneficent flora and fauna to create deadly creatures.

Though measures were taken to keep Aerimus in the dark, he soon discovered these appalling transmogrifications and reached out to those yet loyal to him. From these he learned that the Intendants had made vows before deities their fathers had abhorred. But they now cared only for results, and when success followed their earliest trials, they threw caution to the wind and commanded the Shapers to override Aerimus. When he shut them down and made this impossible, they shaped biotech from resources harvested from other worlds.

RIDERS IN THE VOID

Aerimus wept for his broken people. Wisdom dictated that he exile them to a habitable world, but he did not wish to punish the greater for the sins of the few. And he knew that if he abandoned them, they would only become a target of the Abominor.

Long and bitter years of conflagration followed until the Abominor were at last defeated. But they were not destroyed. And once again, a remnant escaped.

Some would go on to serve as spies, such as the one known as the Great Heep. Others went into hiding, expanding and awaiting the commands of the Dark that issued from the rancid and rotting heart of the Unknown Regions.

The Intendants and surviving Warriors were proud of their victory against the evil Abominor. Meanwhile, their civilization was on the verge of collapse. Workers turned on Intendants, blaming them for their present misery. The Intendants reached out to Aerimus to fix matters, but he had ceased heeding their requests, and only provided food and shelter for the people outside of political channels. In response, the Intendents told the Shapers to find ways to circumvent him further and to continue working on developing new and better armaments in the event that an Abominor remnant returned. But their big project would be the formidable worldships known as *Koros-Strohna*, which would give them greater power and independence from Aerimus.

Aerimus continued to have a loyal contingent amongst the Workers, and he sent these out as emissaries to urge the masses to end the reign of the Intendants and abuses of the Shapers who had "wrought not light but night." But the political and military leaders did not take kindly to this and imprisoned them for sedition. Meanwhile, the science community, basking in their newfound prestige, demonized them with rhetorical terms intended to discredit them in the eyes of the majority.

To more effectively silence the growing voices of dissent demanding a return to the ways of the pre-war society or who spoke against the exploitation of Aerimus and the living creatures of their world, the Shapers were instructed to block the cavemouths through which Aerimus had for so long communicated with the Aerimal loyal to him.

So deeply unpopular did this prove to be when the public learned of it, it nearly led to the eradication of the Intendants. General Yo'gand privately suggested to Intendant Steng that direct oversight of the Domains would help keep them in line. Each Domain would instead have its own Intendant to govern them whereas the members of the Great Council would be elevated to the rank of Lords, both giving the people a semblance of a voice while making clear the chain of command.

Steng agreed and implemented the strategy. But Lord Yo'gand knew it would backfire, for which reason he'd suggested it. Despite Lord Steng's goal of unifying power in the hierarchy, the Domains were splintered by the infighting of egomaniacal leaders, and it was not long before several turned against each other over minor matters. So did the Intendants and Lords begin to whisper of "Steng's Folly."

Aerimus knew he had to take action against the wicked hierarchy leading the people astray. Reshaping and releasing the black-taloned Vua'sa, he sent them forth to target the Lords. Several were torn apart before skilled hunters amongst the Warriors were called upon to vanquish the Vua'sa Queen whom the people called "the Warmaster," offering a title and boon to whosoever might accomplish this.

When Jihem Stoor of Domain Stoor slaughtered the great beast, Lord Steng asked, "What do you wish as reward for this great deed, *Warmaster* Stoor?"

Hailing from a clan of near-Human artists and sculptors who dwelt on the planet Maelich, called the Golden World, Jihem Stoor balked at the Lords' transparent overreach. "Domain Stoor wishes to govern its own affairs," he replied. "We would have Maelich be an ally to the Aerimal but otherwise autonomous in its own political and military affairs."

Infuriated by this request, the obdurate Lords and autocratic Intendants struck Domain Stoor from the annals and declared them enemies of the state. In defiance, Domain Stoor sent a challenge to the Lords, demanding that they send a champion to face them in ship-to-ship combat. If Domain Stoor lost, they would submit. If they won, they and anyone else who wished to would be given leave to secede and live peaceably. Lord Ryter Ustain agreed to the challenge, but he was not about to go alone. His new fleet of mecho-organic Zokon vessels sailed forth like grey, giant toadstools across cold space, spurting deadly antimatter pods. Domain Stoor expected no less than dishonor and sent out their fleet of green, mecho-organic ships, the amorphous Sfiṅgar.

From the Dominicus War, all but one emerged as victor, that of Warmaster Jihem Stoor. Domain Ustain was gone. But those who'd fought for the freedom of Maelich and the Aerimal would find their success short-lived. When Stoor and his crew returned to Maelich, they learned just how badly they'd underestimated the depths of the Lords' malice. Corpses alone remained on the former Golden World. In the form of a plague bomb, the Lords had sent a message to all the Domains.

As the plague was still active at the time of their return, every member of Stoor's crew, save for Stoor himself, perished. Now the last of his clan, Stoor returned to his Sfiṅgar in despair. With neither justice nor retaliation a possibility, he headed into the void. And in the utter darkness of the vast, empty space between galaxies, he

spent long years searching for a place where there were no people, plagues, or war… Unable to find such a fabled land, he eventually forsook his own selfhood, merging with the living aspects of his ship until the two were one and simply called themselves *Ship*.

To ensure that the other Domains did not rise up in retaliation, the Great Council convened. It was decided that in order to keep the masses in line, they must be given a purpose that would unite them. It would have to coincide with a policy of conquest and expansion, as their resources had been sorely diminished in the War of Abominatium, and Aerimus was yet working against them.

Finding a scapegoat was easy. The Aerimal already held a deep hatred of the Abominor. It would be no difficult thing to extend that to all mechanical beings. For those worlds that submitted, the droids could then be seized, recycled, and put to greater uses for the collective. For those that resisted, they would be invaded and see their leaders killed and their entire world taken for their use.

An announcement was sent to each of their Domains that an Abominor was discovered hiding amongst ordinary droids which the escaped remnant had secretly infected. "To save the galaxy and our souls from these abominations," they said, "we must cleanse the galaxy of mechanical beings, and this includes our erstwhile allies, the Silentium, who first brought this war to our shores and are responsible in part for all Aerimal blood that has been spilled."

The Silentium were furious at what amounted to a declaration of war on them, but they refused to slaughter their former allies, and they departed Companion Cresh bitterly, renaming it Yammsoro.

Off into the stars they sailed, resolving to never again trust the organic inhabitants of the universe who they deemed unstable and unworthy of their friendship.

One Silentium named Rotomagus took this opportunity to go off and explore on his own, eventually coming to settle a world known as Ronyards to which he felt oddly drawn. There, a voice that dwelt deep within addressed him. Startled, Rotomagus asked if he was a vile Abominor, but receiving no response, he descended far under the crust to find out. What he learned none know, but ever after he would take seriously his charge to look after the abandoned of Ronyards.

PARRICIDE IN THE CREMLEVIAN WAR

The declaration of the Lords was met with great resistance from the other races in their galaxy, nearly all of whom relied on droids for their various labors, and this was true even for many of Aerimal's cousins spread out across various worlds.

To overcome the problem of being constantly questioned at every turn, they established a Priest class selected from the Shaper and Intendant castes who'd delved deeper into the *Thothnych Manuscript*. They claimed to speak for Aerimus, who they renamed Yuuzhan'tar, which meant "the Homeworld," for this name would now be used as a rallying point for their jingoistic agenda. "Our Maker is angry at you," the Priests announced, "and will not again speak with you until you have completed the

work assigned, namely the salvation of the galaxy, which is our mission as the Children of Yuuzhan'tar! Those who cannot see this are in thrall to the Abominor and must be saved for their own good and the good of all."

As the Priests, Intendants, and Lords all spoke in agreement, so were the people induced to listen, even if they had not previously been inclined to, and any civilizations who opposed them were deemed infidels and attacked. In this way did the Children's Crusades begin….

The Sobekk clan of Chasch who dwelt in Yammsoro were amongst the first to be assaulted by the Lords of the Great Council, who renamed them the Chazrach, which meant "devious hunting dogs," as this is how they saw them. For one reason alone had they allowed them to live: ingrained in Sobekk culture was an abiding hatred for mechanical life, their forebears having fought against the Xylan Empire. The Lords used this ancient history as yet another example of the evil inherent in droids.

Others did not fare as well. The Arbrans were attacked and eventually wiped out, as were all others who refused to submit to tyranny, including many of the descendents of those who first came with them upon Aerimus in the long years past.

This was the last straw. Aerimus would no longer abide these fiend-spawned lawbreakers. He destroyed the barriers over the cavemouths. But he did not stop there. As they had shattered the pact, he was no longer bound by it, and so he telepathically announced to all of the Aerimal on all the worlds of the galaxy this proclamation: "You have broken the Covenant of Peace between us, murdered the innocent, slaughtered even your own brothers, and ignored me, who invited you upon my body and who you claimed as your god, though never did I assert such a thing! Since you have refused to cease your violence, abandon your evil gods, and destroy the weapons you have made against my will, I will depart and leave you on your vaunted worldships, for this is what I would have done long before but for those amongst you blameless of the iniquities of your Intendants, Priests, and Shapers. Now, I will see the Great Council destroyed by means of my servants."

The Lords of the Great Council grew fearful at this speech. They could not afford to have their people revolt again. Also, the Chazrach had come nipping at their heels, looking for a weakness to exploit. With Aerimus deemed a threat that had to be eliminated, and Lord Steng deemed weak, they plotted in secret behind his back.

Instructed by the Intendants, the Priests cleverly prepared a public response, claiming that the voice that had spoken was not Yuuzhan'tar at all but an Abominor trick intended to confuse them by means of deception. As to the Vua'sa yet breeding on their world (for there were yet other queens), they said they were emissaries of Yuuzhan'tar sent to test and strengthen them for the days ahead.

But the Council had another problem. Lord Steng had discovered their plot and would not hear of it. "Fools!" he reprimanded. "It is one thing to make an example of a rebellious Domain. It is another to kill our own Homeworld, whom we once loved as a parent." Vehemently the Lords disagreed, trying to convince him that if they did not go on the offensive, Yuuzhan'tar would wipe them all out. Steng knew too that it was time to make a demonstration of his superiority so that he did not seem weak,

and when the Great Council was called back into session, Lord Steng strode in after the others carrying the head of the Great Vua'sa King. "I am now Warmaster Steng, your *Overlord*, and this Great Council will serve as *my* advisors!"

By and large, the Lords were impressed, but Yo'gand knew he would have to do something and quickly before the others grew used to the idea of *Overlord* Steng ruling them. He yet had the backing of other Lords and Intendants who resented and feared the powerful influence of Domain Steng, so he stood up and challenged the Warmaster, claiming he was unfit to rule them and that he, Lord Yo'gand, would do better as their Warmaster and Overlord.

In the midst of a galaxy at war, in the rage-fueled madness that became known as the Cremlevian War—so named for Warmaster Yo'gand's birthworld of Cremlev—civil war erupted between the Domains of Warmaster Yo'gand and Overlord Steng and all of their allies which were forced now to take sides.

Having long prepared for this moment, Warmaster Yo'gand called upon his secret cabal of Shapers who'd been working on a special project for him. It was called a Dovin Basal. This giant, spherical-shaped, sentient plant was capable of several wondrous things, including the ability to generate powerful force-fields. Secretly, it had been installed on Warmaster Steng's Domain world of Ygziir. Now it used its gravitic manipulation to pull the moon down to the planet. In horror, Warmaster Steng wached as Ygziir and all of Domain Steng was destroyed in one fell swoop. The tactic was thereafter known as Yo'gand's Core.

Now, as Overlord Yo'gand, he inaugurated sweeping changes across their former federation. And it would be his first directive that would prove the most devastating. It was claimed that the traitor Steng had released a plague bomb on the Homeworld, necessitating all Aerimal depart offworld immediately. This was of course a lie, but it had the desired effect. Once emptied of all but Aerimus' most loyal supporters, Overlord Yo'gand ordered the shelling to begin.

It was this that Cold Danda Sine had seen long before and this which had caused him that rare experience of grief, for it was he who'd first conceived of the Abominor that set off the very conditions that would lead to his offspring's demise.

The process of killing Aerimus would be no short or painless one, and though he yet had companions that strove to help him and power that could easily have destroyed the entire Aerimal race, he would not wipe out the good with the bad, not even to save his own life. But neither could he flee, for several Dovin Basals had come to surround him, creating an interdiction field that prevented his escape. And with them came forth new creatures the Shapers had crafted based on techniques he'd long before shared with them, techniques they'd polluted with their forbidden scrolls, creating monsters from the once-gentle creatures he'd made or from beings they'd encountered along the way.

But by far the worst of these were not of their making, though the Shapers were given the means by which to breed more. The malevolent Yammosk King had been spawned long ago in the Charnel Worlds by Xothians and StarCrow from the mixed genetic material of Sarmaks and the ancient Arous King. The offspring race that the Yuuzhan Vong call Yammosks were procreated from the first and largest of these,

which was named after Yamm'ka—for it was none other than he who'd taken possession of this great one and came to Yammsoro to rule as the god Yun-Yammka.

But Aerimus had a plan. He would hold off the forces bent on destroying him while, in secret, send forth his three seedlings into which his love and spirit would pass. Yet even in this did the Overlord try to rob him, for when the Lords and the monsters they'd brought saw the seedling planets emerge, they sought to kill them.

So aggrieved was Aerimus by the culmination of their cruelty and betrayal that he channeled all of his energies into this one thing—stopping this deranged race from murdering his offspring—and in so great a fury did he act that it is said the wrathful spirit of his ancient father worked through him. Instinctually and with barely conscious effort, Aerimus drained the Midichlorians from each and every Aerimal, transferring them into his wounded offspring and stopping his persecutors in their tracks as they were suddenly sent into shocking paroxysms and collapse.

Confused, the monsters halted their assault, but too late for Aerimus. They had nonetheless achieved their objective. Aerimus was dead. He'd survived just long enough to see his seedlings flee beyond the reach of those who would harm them.

The first of the seedlings would grow into a mighty planet called Tsonoma-Sekt. The Ferroans would translate the name as the "World of Body and Mind," but older derivations pointed to it as the "Place of the Earth-Scion" and also the darker "Punisher of the Earth-Sect." The name by which he is known today is Zonama Sekot.

The second was called D'vaaran, which also had a number of meanings, the most benign being "The Spring," but the other being "The Dangerous One." During the reign of Emperor Palpatine, D'vaaran would be found and captured by the Shi'ido scientist, Borborygmus Gog, who cheekily renamed him *D'vouran* after making him part of his Project Starscream experiment. Gog subjected him to the torture of the Essence Stealer, an entechment device he'd built based on the theory of another demented scientist, Jenna Zan Arbor, and a stolen Ssi-Ruuvi Swarm-class battle droid. D'vaaran was, henceforth, driven to madness, killing and, indeed, devouring the life-force of every sapient being that came upon him.[207]

A third was known as Aucturn, but this one was lured into Illathurion where it became corrupted to the will of darkness.

The Yammosks watched as the Aerimal awoke in great pain and difficulty, for they were as walking wounds wholly separated from the crucial life-energy provided by the interaction of the Whills and the Midichlorians. They should not have even been alive but for something *unnatural* that animated them, something that later gave them powers akin to the Force, something derived from the Anti-Force.

It was a fall from grace into a kind of living death, but Aerimus had not turned them into the living dead, nor were they condemned to a state of evil. They could

[207] Except for the Enzeen who were rendered immune. Gog had abducted them from Ensolica, where their numbers were becoming a problem for the near-Human colonists. He experimented on them with personal field-generators that rendered them distasteful to D'vouran. The Enzeen lured explorers and tourists to the world to be eaten while they, in turn, fed upon the nutrients the world provided.

have repented, for that is initially what they desired in their emptied, aching hearts when they learned that their Homeworld was truly dead and felt the ramifications of their actions firsthand. But the Overlord, Warmasters, Intendants, Shapers, and Priests were quick to reassert control, for their hearts had already rotted inside them long before they'd committed parricide. For them, their transition to living voids was merely the final plunge into a dead sea of debasement, the black waters from which they'd long been dipping.

In the midst of his people's grief for Yuuzhan'tar and themselves, Overlord Yo'gand consulted with the Priests and made an announcement: "Yuuzhan'tar has sacrificed himself to save us from the plague that assaulted us. He will forever be remembered as the Crèche of the Gods, for he has given birth to offspring gods who dwell upon another plane with him!" This pantheon, called the Great Ones and *Yun'o*, was brought forth to placate not only the people but the dark spirits that continued to whisper to them. The Goddess was included, for she was known and revered even as far out as the dwarf galaxies. Others would be added as required. "But he has also been elevated and is known now as Yun-Yuuzhan while we, his dutiful people, will be his Yuuzhan Vong. Of his offspring, there are the Twin Gods, Yun-Harla the Trickster, who will test us, and Yun-Yammka the Slayer, who will strengthen us through conquest. Yun-Ne'Shel the Modeler will shape us as she shapes paradise before us, and Yun-Shuno the Pardoner will forgive us when we fail."

Out of this new religion the Priests had developed came a mephitic bounty of atramentous lore in tandem with a death-cult fixated on the self-infliction of pain and suffering. The "True Way" of self-mutilation would be the sole means of assuaging shame and guilt, appeasing the gods, and bringing worshipers closer to escalation.

Domains would no longer battle each other, at least not openly, but would instead promote the state religion that cast their role as divine emissaries under the leadership of the Supreme Overlord. Discipline and strict obedience to a caste system would now be valued along with honor and skill in combat. The scientists and alchemists yet called Shapers would continue developing arcane technology, only now without a conscience or the objections of Aerimus and the citizens to bother them.

A succession of constant and devastating wars along with the appropriation of resources by which the Shapers created their biological horrors completed the stripping of the galaxy's mineral-wealth that the Abominor had started in Yammsoro. It was time to find another galaxy. Upon finishing the last of their *Koros-Strohna* worldships, they sent out their Slivilith scouts and departed.

For many millennia they would be lost in the Intergalactic Void, and there they would likely have remained had not Wutzek been captured, for what few know is that what happened to the Yuuzhan Vong was no accident of history but part of a concealed and unfolding pattern of the ever-lengthening shadow. Nonetheless, had Wutzek not been present to impalpably and persistently thwart the Five, the seals would have been broken and the Immortal Gods of the Sith would have been set free. But during this period of test for the galaxy, in which only Horliss-Horliss served as the Guardian of the Gates and Barriers, other evils tried to gain a foothold.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FOUR

UNDULATIONS OF THE TWO-HEADED BEAST

THE TRUE SITH EMPIRE

Concentrated in the twelve stellar clusters of the Nihil Retreat where billions suffered under the daemoniacal despotism of the Sorcerers of Rhand, thaumaturges of Tund, and the nameless monstrosities that had come to dwell there, the True Sith Empire's deathly tendrils continued to expand outwards, reaching to the many glittering gems in the firmament, from the edge of the galaxy to the Deep Core.

As the borders of the Galactic Republic expanded in the Kymoodon Era, the frontier increasingly brushed against the scattered redoubts of the True Sith that yet percolated on the fringes of Known Space outside their numinous prison, covertly infusing the Republic's heart with devotees of the Dark, cultures that would drain them of resources and paint the galaxy in gradations of grey. And efficacious were their efforts at repelling enquiry. Using pre-emptive strikes and uprisings, they kept the Republic, who assumed that they were pirates, from learning the truth.

Early in the Indecta Era, several Jedi were dispatched to Krayiss II where the raids appeared to originate. Unaware of the hooded assailants that waited there, and with a force far too small, the Jedi not outright killed were corrupted into a schismatic Dark Path cult that settled on neighboring Dromund Kaas. When a much larger Jedi contingent was sent to investigate, Krayiss II was quietly abandoned, leaving only the great library-temple with the spirits of embedded sorcerers to ensnare anyone poking around in search of knowledge.

In the millennia to come, further Republic expansions and Jedi astrogation expeditions forced the True Sith to withdraw further, ultimately abandoning their ancestral homeworlds and most of their strongholds in the known galaxy such as Malachor V and Doan, leaving their wayward brethren in the Stygian Caldera to their internecine struggles. But these were calculated operations that occurred while the True Sith advanced on independent civilizations isolated for millennia from the wider galaxy, laying waste to them with armies of ghouls from the millions of infected, supplying technology to the Waymancy, radicalizing the Bitthaevrian, Hiitite (later Hiitian), and Mugaari (some of whom broke off at this time to become the Vagaari), and ushering in conflicts that allowed the Daughter of Tilotny to once more escape.

By the end of the Pius Dea Crusades, the Jedi had sullied themselves in the events that culminated in the sanguinary battle against the Order of the Terrible Glare. Five thousand years after the defeat of Dread Rur, the black cauldron was stirred again, first by a client race of the old Enemy; then by another Kashi descendent then living on Alsakan.

THE ZANIBAR AND THE MONSTER OF MEDRIAAS

Early in the Manderon Period, one of the most dangerous of the client races of the Old Ones came to the fore. Impelled by the barbarous inclinations of their Zanibar forebears and the secrets they'd uncovered, the Jokath sent their Eternal Fleet to terrorize neighboring worlds at the behest of their political leaders who unleashed the Titan battle droids known as the Six Gods. These had been fashioned and mythologized in homage to the evil gods of old, they whose idols, glimpsed in searing visions, stood atop blasphemous temples on the nethermost circle of the Charnel Worlds. Along with these emerged the droid intelligences known as the GEMINI, ARIES, and SCORPIO as well as the deadly Zildrog and his colossal combat frigate, the *Gravestone*.[208]

Ostensibly answering to a council composed of their greatest minds, in reality, the Jokath were ruled by a tyrant more terrible than even their creations: Master Designer Vel Jyc Boer. Boer ordered the planet of Medriaas to be scoured by Zildrog in order to wipe out a hidden conclave of M'ust that had been unduly influencing their people to return to the light.

The genocide of the peaceful M'ust on Medriaas had the opposite effect. The horrified citizenry rejected Boer and turned to less violent pursuits, constructing the artificial habitat of Iokath to better house their ever-growing numbers and testing weapons on simulations rather than real targets. In revenge, Boer called upon the Heralds of Zildrog cult to sow the seeds of discord, wreaking a civil war on Iokath intended to punish a society he deemed as having lost its way. This infuriated the Jokath, and with superweapons employed by both sides, the conflagration blazed out of control, and Boer perished along with the rest of the Jokath, thereby ending a grave threat to galactic peace and stability.

THE GOBLIN HOARD OF ALSAKAN

Geneticist and astrographer Coqui Tanar was a professor of science and man of extraordinary intelligence hampered by equal amounts of impatience towards his students, arrogance towards the faculty, and disdain for the galactic religions and their practitioners. In 7106 BBY, late in the the Subterra Period (8000 to 7000 BBY), a strange circumstance led him to work on an excavation in a recently discovered underground network of tunnels on Alsakan.

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[208] In a vault beneath Medriaas, a caprine-headed idol of the Left-Handed God was erected and flanked by statues of Typhojem. In the Sith tome, *Komo'rompo'* (Penetrating the Breach), it was said to have imparted a defiling spirit to a young Tenebrae. Interestingly, *Zildrog* is the Zanibar translation of "StarCrow," with *zil*, referring to silver—used to indicate "stars," and *d'rog*, "of the crow," which was held as an avatar of evil (see also: *drog*, "evil"). Zildrog would again be used when Vitiate called upon its assistance in the transmogrification of flesh, and in this are parallels found with the computers of Rur, the transmutation tower of Ninmah Ixgûl, and the engine of mass sacrifice constructed by Naga Sadow and used by Exar Kun and Revan

The dig was plagued with problems from the outset, and more than once did his colleagues joke that the site was cursed. Evidence pointed to booby-traps, and several times Tanar averted snares that might otherwise have harmed them had he not intuited the danger moments in advance. And there were the odd sounds they would occasionally hear, footsteps, whispers, and at the corner of their vision, noctilucent eyes that blinked and disappeared. The final straw came when one of the scientists ended up mysteriously raked by something that flashed out of the dark. Although he chalked it up to an accident, their nerves were frayed to the breaking point, and with the need for medical attention, they departed.

Compelled to continue, on his own if need be, Tanar returned the next day, reasoning that the attack was likely an animal spooked by the noise of intruders. He returned to the location where it had happened and found a hidden entrance into which he could fit. Curiously, it opened to a large cavern. Not wanting to risk brightening his torch in the event that he startled a nest, he waited for his eyes to adjust. That was when something revealed itself.

Tanar shuddered and turned up his lamp. Here were no known beasts. One after another appeared out of the crevices and shadows. Tanar was not easily frightened, but even he had to acknowledge that they rather closely resembled beings from old folk tales that were said to live in mines and caves hoarding treasures. For the sake of easy categorization, Tanar began to distinguish them by the names given to the various Veil Folk of legend, discerning at least four different races amongst them, what might be considered Gnomes, Hobgoblins, Ogres, and Trolls. He didn't actually believe that's what they were, of course, and presumed they were likely the degenerate, devolved members of various troglodyte races with whom he was unfamiliar.

He was admittedly startled when one of them called him by name and summoned him to follow. Assuming the creature had overheard his companions use his name the day before, he agreed to follow the shambling group into the depths of the cave. An opportunity to study a lost race was too good to pass up, and although they clearly had their own agenda, he reasoned that it was unlikely to be violence, else they could easily have overpowered and killed him right then and there.

After a long descent through precarious slopes, cramped and winding tunnels, and dark, disorienting passageways, Tanar began to question his wisdom in having assented to this trek. Perhaps they didn't want to drag his body all the way to their lair or wanted him for some abstruse purpose best not thought upon. His silent escorts only grunted and gibbered when he questioned them, occasionally pointing ahead and nodding. But just when he decided he'd had enough, he alighted upon a mid-sized chamber with one mode of entrance and egress.

Apart from a sparkling mound of ornately carved jewels, cups, coins, and swords, there were the remains of several skeletons in the far corner, and, judging by the odd lengths of their femur and tibia bones, as well as the shapes of their skulls, Tanar presumed them to be of the same mixed races who'd come to lead him to the hoard.

Digging into the sparkling gems and coins, one of the shorter, long-eared creatures that he called a Gnome pulled out a cache of scroll tubes, costly ones by the look of

them, designed to preserve their contents from the deleterious effects of atmosphere and age. One of the larger lumbering beings, whom Tanar had reckoned a Troll, began placing them in a large sack along with a hefty portion of gems and coins. Another bestial being that he called a Kobold was already filling a second sack, while another filled a third.

By the time they were done, there was nothing of the treasure left. Once the sacks were stuffed to capacity, the odd beings tied and set them down on a dolly pulled from the corner of the room. Tanar didn't know if he was intended to haul it for them or if they were purchasing his services. After taking another drink from his canteen, he tried to explain that he had little to offer in return, but they either didn't understand or care to articulate their wishes. They seemed almost anxious to get rid of the hoard, but that seemed absurd even for primitives as these. The only thing the Gnome would say is, "Yours, if you want it."

Covering it with a tarp, they handed him the dolly and, without so much as a farewell, turned and left, leaving only the Gnome to accompany him out. The way out led in a different direction than the one in. Tanar had at first thought he was needed to cart the treasure to their lairs in some other part of the underground, but, given the size and strength of the Troll, that seemed improbable. Finally, they reached a cave that led to the outside world.

"You're *giving* me this?" Tanar asked before the small Gnome could retreat into his hole. The creature stopped to look at him. "Why would you do that?"

"No *gift* this is," replied the small Gnome in Basic. The accent was difficult to place, but the sour expression was unmistakable, "but a *curse*."

"So it is payment for some service," Tanar acceded. "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing. We did what we must. If you accept it, take it and go."

"This makes no sense. Why would you give a complete stranger a fortune?"

The Gnome leaned in, his distaste plain to read. "On a path you have been put. Dark will it be. No more will I say."

Tanar held back a derisive snort. *Superstition!* Still, he wouldn't look a gift nerf in the mouth. "Fine. I am grateful, nonetheless." At that, the small creature seemed to smirk. He ignored the impudence. "What manner of being are you?"

"Know this already, you do."

"How could you know what I know?"

"Wise, you deem yourself, but *foolish* you are, barbarous your true nature." The creature began to scuttle off. "No more will I say."

"Wait," Tanar demanded. "I concede that you have more intelligence than I first gave you credit for. But I will not deny I have a curious mind and, yes, a foul temper. You have given me this *curse*, as you call it. So be it! Consider this a way to balance the scales: answer some questions so that I don't return later to ask again…" It was said politely, but the threat was apparent, yet the squat creature didn't seem concerned. If anything, he looked even more smug.

"What answer would you have me give?"

"I asked you before what manner of being you and your people are." Tanar was beginning to feel impatient. "You're what? A *Gnome*? Is that what you mean?" When the creature only smiled mischievously, Tanar's anger burst to the surface. "Nonsense! No such things exist!"

"Know this, how?" the Gnome queried.

"*Science!*" Tanar roared, his face now red.

"And its spokesperson *you* are?"

Tanar took a moment to calm himself. He was letting this contrarian creature, whatever he really was, get the better of him. "Have your people always lived in these tunnels? Or were you once aboveground dwellers?"

"A short tale I will grant you—though believe it, you will not. After this, no more will I say. Powers there are, greater than you or I. Our people, from different worlds came…"

More nonsense. "I see. Probably hitched a ride aboard a star cruiser. Is that where the treasure came from?"

"*See* you do not! No rides did we hitch," the Gnome corrected.

"Impossible! You have no technology."

"But a drop in a vast ocean is your science, polluted by the philosophy of small minds and dark hearts. Winding are these tunnels, rare though they have become in the deep places of the worlds… from the Elementals were they burrowed long ago… Connect some do to other worlds. My own sires, led by the Bog King, found one such in the Dark Forest of our world. Deep beneath the roots of the mountains and secret underground passes, others found them as well; doors from Andowyne to Mu-Ab; from Thra to Garban; from Vjun to Sagar; from Lesser Tana to Wodan, and many more besides. Spread out, we did, e'er to remain hidden, legends—*fairy tales*, you call us—unbelieved… But long histories we have, of battles against Siqsa and Dragons and wicked men."

"If such stories were true, you would not be allied with those I saw earlier."

"Ah, indeed! It was not always so. Great battles were fought against the Troll Kings and their hordes, for at all times does evil work in this way, when ignorance to foolishness is turned, and foolishness to violence, all guided by the voice of false-wisdom. Thousands were the heads of the Goblins we smashed, but only when the kings were destroyed, their bodies burned, their ashes scattered to the four winds, did we find peace." The Gnome gazed at him with a look that seemed to suggest that he himself had led such battles, that he himself had wielded mace and sword to crack and shatter the skulls of the Troll Kings…

Duplicitous vermin! "You're right. I *don't* believe you."

"Think you that I care!" The Gnome laughed ruefully as he hobbled to the entrance leading back to his burrow.

"I have not finished with my questions!" Tanar strode forward angrily to prevent his escape when he was slammed to the ground by an invisible force. Panic set in when he realized he couldn't move or speak. The last thing he saw before he blacked out was the Gnome's wizened face glaring down mercilessly at him.

When Tanar awoke, he was in his home, the treasure intact upon the study floor. He had no memory of having returned from the cave. If the local authorities had brought him back, they likely would have taken him first to a physician and waited to question him regarding the contents of the bulging sacks.

The mystery would keep. He had the coins and jewels sold by trusted agents and converted to credits. Secluding himself from his associates, he at last had time to examine the ancient scrolls. He expected most to be anonymous, in keeping with the character of old texts, but that was not the case here. Many were composed by someone named Daritha Soros, who'd written them in the common tongue of the Rakata, making them easily translatable. They were mainly religious in nature, dealing with the worship of entities with unpronounceable names. The rest were spellbooks. Some contained histories of various conflicts. One even included the names of Soros' lieutenants on Alsakan, reflecting the lineage of numerous noblemen running throughout the last twenty millennia of Archais' royal history, including the Previls and the Bindalins.

After some time and research, Tanar validated their authenticity. As they were not forgeries, that meant they were priceless and belonged in museums to be studied as cultural artifacts. And yet every time he made the attempt to pack them up or even contact the academy, he stopped himself. *There must be a reason I'm so reticent to do this*, he told himself. Pondering this, he reasoned that the information in the scrolls led to other sites. If he handed them over, those sites would be visited by the academic teams from the Archais Academy. The governments of those worlds would attempt to claim propriety over their discoveries while the board of Archais Academy would make lucrative deals with their own government to hold on to their contents for translation purposes, a process that would inevitably take decades.

No. Tanar had made the arduous trip to retrieve these manuscripts. He would follow the trail himself, retrieve the treasures they led to, and then, once he'd had sufficient time to study and cross-reference the materials with the Soros Manuscripts, he'd release them to the Archais Academy to do with as they would.

A MAGIC TRICK WITH FRIENDS

Tanar went to Tomo-Reth, Thule, Fluwhaka, Xo's Eye, and Lettow, and in each location uncanny coincidences continued to occur. Of the most significant materials he uncovered were the personal journals of Xendor, a fellow Kashi descendant who had rejected the dogma of his leaders on Ossus and started a war over his belief in the freedom to learn and teach things outside of the narrow strictures of the Jedi. *Here was a real hero*, thought Tanar, *willing to defy the creeds and superstitions of the prevailing authority*.

Professor Tanar's assiduities were time-consuming and required a withdrawal from society which had not escaped the notice of his colleagues. He'd initially acknowledged his new focus of research to his closest companions with a measure of candor he later came to rue, begrudging the fact that they'd often contact him to get progress

reports and see if he wanted assistance. But where at the start of the process he'd utilized their expertise, he now surmised they had less than pure motives and wished they'd leave him alone. To underscore the point, he stopped responding altogether.

One day, after shutting himself up for nearly a year, a group of them appeared unannounced at his home. They found him in a state of disarray and gauntness quite unlike his former self, and though they kept this observation to themselves, he caught their shared looks of dismay. *Hypocrites!* It took all his resolve to conceal his resentment, but other odd-sounding notions escaped his mouth, accustomed as he'd gotten to talking to himself. "I'm fine," he repeated when asked about his health, but when they got around to asking about his progress, he croaked, "They *work*!" When asked to explain, he grew wide-eyed, and then, cautiously, led them into his dimly lit, manuscript-strewn antechamber where—drenched in perspiration and the sweat of too many unwashed days—he asked them to sit as he withdrew to freshen up.

When he returned, he was like a different man, having cleaned up and donned a fresh set of clothes. Sounding more akin to the amicable host they'd previously known, he apologized for his disconcerted actions, which he attributed to lack of sleep and an unremitting workload, and expressed gratitude at their concern, promising to finally show them the results of all the efforts he'd been strenuously putting forth, noting matter-of-factly, "Indeed, the formulae in the spellbook seem to have… *efficacy*. I hope to demonstrate that for you today."

Skeptical but fascinated by anything involving primordial secrets and seduced by the expensive thil, segir, arrack, and other exotic intoxicants he offered them, they agreed to stay as he went through a series of minor spells. Though entertained, they admitted that they did not believe such "tricks" to be actual magic, suggesting that he was either starting a new career as a professional magician or using previously unknown natural properties. Tanar congratulated them! The latter surmise was, in fact, what he believed, for this was not magic but an esoteric kind of science only few knew about. But an idea came to him. He wrestled with it for what seemed like a long time but was only a moment, deciding finally that it was so delicious that he couldn't help himself. He offered to show them something "truly revelatory, something that will not only expand your minds but change the course of the galaxy."

Eager to see what this might be and partly inebriated from the copious flow of spirits, they watched in anticipation as Tanar brought out an oddly shaped artifact and proceeded to recite a soliloquy in a language they'd never before heard. At times, it was as if another voice joined with his. This mildly spooked them, but they chalked it up to theatrics and remained transfixed by the "magic" unfolding before them—particularly the strange object that seemed to waver and shift as they stared at it.

"Give it a minute. According to the manuscript," Tanar offered, "this experiment was first pioneered by the iniquitous sorcerer, Zelashiel the Blasphemer, who first used it on members of his court who'd betrayed him… Certainly, I have no concerns in that area. None of my own friends would go behind my back and report that I was illegally collecting artifacts."

By the time his guests started to protest that they would never do such a thing, they were feeling intense body aches. When paralysis set in, they grew alarmed. What followed was nothing short of a nightmare. By the completion of the hex—after the soul-wrenching screams of his former associates had finally ceased and only their smoking skeletons remained—Professor Coqui Tanar gathered up his important belongings, set fire to his home, and said goodbye to Alsakan.

A DARTH IS BORN

With his precious manuscripts in tow, Coqui Tanar—now Ku'ar Danar—departed for Malachor V, whereupon he followed the hidden passages and abandoned trails to the Trayus Academy. He imagined that his steps were being guided by some unseen presence, but that was just a bit of whimsy he allowed himself to indulge in to account for the odd occurrences. He still had trouble reconciling the murder of his friends and colleagues, but he justified it on the grounds that he didn't know for certain that the spell would actually work. Besides, they probably had reported him or would soon have done so. He had no evidence to that effect, just a feeling, but he convinced himself that it was enough for him to have acted in self-defense.

The Trayus Academy was a marvel of construction and like nothing else he'd previously explored. The star charts, which were the first of the treasures he uncovered, were an amazing piece of tech, mentally imparting to him a path to Korriban in a blast of astrographic imagery. In the furnaces of the Trayus Core he came upon a fearsome suit of crimson armor that, uncannily, fit. But his main interest was drawn to the ancient hermetica unearthed in scrolls that intimated knowledge of secret realities and dark dimensions.

That he could now read the hieratic script as if he'd been born to it was another mystery that he'd have to find a reasonable explanation for.

But then he heard the whispers and stopped. In that blighted chamber, surrounded by shattered caryatids of coleopterous she-devils and tapering, obsidian megaliths that encircled him like closing teeth, Danar shone a light. He could see nothing. A voice declared, "The truths of the cosmos are not for conventional minds!"

Convinced now that he'd been drawn into the lair of some diabolist or worse, a cult of diabolists, he shouted in defiance, "I have no interest in your *religion!*"

The next thing he knew, he was hanging suspended above a chasm of roiling energy. His eyes danced with the baleful green fires yawning beneath the Trayus Core. The whispers crawling in his skull grew more fervent, bidding him to reach into the glowing yellow sigil. He looked about. Upon a half-seen base of the column, resting on the rocks beneath the silently screaming vacua of stars, he felt it. *Draw forth from its stone the golden, pyramidal jewel*. He did. The chimerical crystal glowed radioactive as with the primordial death-energies of whatever faraway, phantasmagoric city it had come from, yet it felt cold as space to the touch.

That was when his agony began. He tried to drop the jewel, but could not.

Electrical lances of fire and frost tore through his frame.

"*Unworthy!* Pledge your allegiance to the Dark!" the voice from the fires demanded.

Danar had until now held back his screams, more out of pride than might, but he could no longer. The pain was unbearable. In rage, he lashed forth invectives.

"Pledge your allegiance to the Dark!"

The intensity increased until he thought he was roasting alive, but never enough to cause him to black out. His shrieks filled the temple. Still, he held back, resisting.

A snap of a finger, the crack of a bone. "Pledge your allegiance to the Dark!"

"I *pledge*! I pledge allegiance to the Dark!!"

Now, the burning ceased, and garbled whispers sharpened into an execrable voice that to Danar seemed to come straight from the void. "Thou hast pledged, so shalt thou be called to account." This speech was hissed in the rotting language of the ancient Sith, each syllable containing hidden meanings that unspooled with unbidden revelation in his mind. Imagery from the past and far future flashed in time to the epileptic flurry of splitting lightning. "Thou art Dathka Danwar, which in thy tongue shalt be known as Darth Dreadwar, for the honor of the High Shaman is granted thee, and the Lords of the Galaxy shalt be thy masters. Thou shalt raise the heads of the beast from perdition and bring this realm to Chaos."

"Who are you?" Danar asked. "By what name do I call you?"

"It matters not what names I bore in the long ages past, only that I am he who turns brother against brother, nation against nation, planet against planet. I am the star who came not at the appointed time, the mountain that burns in the darkest pits. I am he before whom thou shalt kneel when all turns to ash at the end of time."

"I know not of riddles and metaphors, but I bow my head to your superior mastery of the unexplored sciences and accept this commission to learn more and gain the power I have long deserved."

The hateful voice laughed mockingly and spurred him to pass on what he'd learned, imparting unto him a final gift, a great winged steed descended from that most ancient brood of Nilrebmah XII. So Dreadwar left Malachor for Korriban.

Years later, he'd return to that crimson-lit chamber where in visions and maddening prophecies he went on to pen his own grimoires to join the store of fell knowledge, drawing from the holocron's most despicable rites and dark sorcery to give form to three of the vilest tomes in all Forcecraft that would find their way to the keep of Darth Andeddu on Prakith and the vaults of the Mecrosa on Nyssa.[209]

[209] They are: *Jiaas'kintikqoqyâsik* ("From the Darkest Way of the Force"), dedicated to inscrutable yet instructional auguries; *Hoyakutghoul* ("Long-Dead Deformities"), about the Way of the Dark ideology; and *Jiaas'kintikon* ("From the Darkest Heart"), dedicated to rites of grotesque healing and undeath. Mercifully, the fourth tome, *Komo'rompo'* ("Breaking the Seals"), was left unfinished.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-FIVE

EIDOLON OF THE HERESIARCH CONSPIRACY

A TEACHER AND A SEER

On Korriban, the shadow of Darth Dreadwar fell across Horuset as he descended towards equatorial Golg atop his great pterosaur, Woden, whose outspread wings blotted out the sun.

The awe-inspiring effect of this entrance to the gathered Sith left an impression on a lower-caste magician named Drow Graush, who asked to learn from this godlike being and would not be swayed away.

Dreadwar found Graush a capable and loyal student, unencumbered by the baser morality of lesser beings and reverent of his master. He first taught him the High Galactic tongue of Alsakan and the Basic Standard. Then he moved on to the lost sorcery of the ancient Sith, and in this area, Graush demonstrated natural ability and fierce dedication to training. After some months in which he sufficiently mastered certain crucial skills, Dreadwar brought him before the royals on Korriban.

Dreadwar expressed his disappointment at finding they'd forgotten so much of the arts they'd once known. It wasn't their stubborn unwillingness to see reason, nor even their mockery that caused his temper to rise; he understood their pride and independence and the fact that they looked down on one of low-birth like Graush, let alone a Human stranger with grandiose pretensions. But when they dared to order his arrest, his reason vanished like drops of water on a scorching day.

As the royals hurled insults at him while guards rushed forward, pikes outstretched to capture or kill, they suddenly found themselves feeling frail and flaccid. Dreadwar smiled at Graush as they wove *orskfrûm*, siphoning their life-energies and harnessing them so that their own lives would extend beyond their normal spans.

What began as low mutterings turned into a loud and ghastly curse that made ravaged corpses out of the Sith elite who fell smoking to the ground before them. As a test, Dreadwar then tasked Graush to raise them. This was a newly learned skill for the Shadow Hand, but with the life-forces of his former royals infused into him, he had a store of energy upon which to draw. Grimacing, he uttered the hideous curse of *tsaiwinokka hoyakut* that caused the mass of charred limbs to twitch and rise. "Do not try to individually control them. That is a waste of resources that will soon drain you. Return to them enough of a spark of sentience so that they animate themselves as they obey your voice. Is it not an appropriate fate for the curs they were?"

"What if I give too much and they remember who they were?"

"Impossible," Dreadwar informed him. "They are dead and cannot come back. Only the most knowledgeable and mighty of the Sith can cheat death."

Now that they had a living-dead army with which to intimidate the surrounding peoples, they went forth upon Dreadwar's foul beast. After subjugating two-thirds of the Sith on Korriban, they declared themselves the *Jen'ari*—Dark Lords of the Sith.

While not as daring as Darth Vitiate would be millennia later when he adopted the manner of Adas in claiming the Sith'ari title, Dreadwar instead adopted the title of *Magnus*, derived from the High Galactic word for "Great," "Magnificent," or "Emperor," and was thereafter used as an honorific by self-promoted Sith Lords.

Dreadwar then brought Dathka Graush to Naos III, once ruled by the extinct Lurg. His talent with *tsaiwinokka hoyakut* caused him to be proclaimed by its Twi'lek colonists the Necromancer of Naos, which pleased him. "Teach the worthy as I have taught you," Dreadwar instructed, leaving Naos III and Korriban to him. "But remember that the Master must always know more. Uncover what artifacts you might from the remains of those ancient practitioners who once reigned here."

"Where will you be?"

"The Force is drawing me elsewhere. I suspect we will soon have new allies."

Dathka Graush would go on to marry Princess Orem Clo of Naos III and raise up a son, Prince Hakagram, whom he loved. Following his wife's mysterious illness and death, Graush became moody and unpredictable. His ability to teach the people the ways and rites of the Sith was not as good as his master, and often he fell back on violence and brutality to compensate for his failings, leaving a wake of bodies that he would transform into the undead—a skill that no longer endeared him to the people.

A SNAKE IN THE GRASS

In 7103 BBY, Ku'ar Danar used the star charts to make his way to Ossus. By means of forged documents, he posed as an expert on the Jal Shey rationalists to become one of the teachers of alternate philosophies at the prestigious Academy of Metaphysics.

Using his worldly knowledge, wealth, and natural charisma, Ku'ar Danar created an unofficial secret club, inviting only those open to "larger views" of the Force. Danar had hand-selected the earliest members from the most brilliant and troubled young padawans he knew from his class.

There was the Palliduvan, XoXaan, who leaned into her heritage with face tattoos, a love of iconoclastic music, and predictable rebelliousness; Sorzus Syn, the skinny young Atrisian who preferred her science textbooks and terrible poetry to people and the development of social skills; Remulus Dreypa, the bored, short-tempered son of wealthy parents who was more interested in sports than becoming a Jedi, a failing that irked his teachers—none less than Professor Karness Muur, who failed to understand Danar's interest in the galling youth. But Danar would only laugh and note that there was more to all of them than met the eye, particularly in the unlikely ringleader, Ajunta Pall.

Pall was handsome, popular, and idealistic but dissatisfied and troubled by something he went to some lengths to conceal. Danar was aware that Pall had joined only

to spy on them, which meant that someone on the faculty, probably Pall's master, had heard they were skirting the edge.

In any other circumstance, interest in the Dark Side would have proved a passing fad; the staff was well aware of the fascination alternative practices held for the young, though mild reproofs and historical examples were often enough to help them snap to their senses and reject abusing their gifts for selfish ends. But this time would prove to be something different, and it wasn't students alone who joined Danar's Xendor Club—two Jedi Instructors had as well, the Wroonian Swordsmaster, Tulak Hord, and the Professor of Ancient Studies and Philosophies himself, Karness Muur.

In an age when Jedi orthodoxy had yet to be firmly established and many academies and enclaves taught varying practices and codes, Danar found it all too easy—and amusing—to spin his own caricature of Master Homonix Rectonia's Jedi Code, which he imparted to his pupils in a six-line stanza:

Peace is an illusion, for there is passion.
Passionate, I am strong.
Strong, I am powerful.
Powerful, I am victorious.
Victorious, I am unchained.
By Force, freedom is mine.

Gradually, he instigated members of the Xendor Club to go further, intimating that the heads of the academy were hidebound by ideological straitjackets—or worse, looking to keep the deeper truths of the Force to themselves.

"The Force cannot be chopped up like *shuura* fruit," Danar postured in his final speech, his students paying rapt attention as if spellbound. "Ashla? Bogan? *Childish nonsense!* Do not let anyone frighten you with the term *Dark Side*. There is no metaphysical basis for such a label, only a mistranslation of the word 'Jen' from the Old Tongue, which would be better translated as *hidden*—the hidden arts. Hidden from persecution, perhaps? Or perhaps simply hidden from sight, for the ancient moon of Bogan that lent this foolish superstition its name was a dark moon with red soil rich in valuable minerals."

With a cunning application of philosophy and science through a filter of sophistry, Danar went on to deconstruct the very notion of the Dark Side, eroding all barriers in his students' minds. "I can find no evidence of any kind supporting a metaphysical split in the Force, much less some *Para-Force* of spiritual corruption beyond, though it may be that localized areas echo with the psychic footprints of Force-users who once lived there. But two sides? One of peace and serenity? The other of anger and hate? How does such an extraordinary claim—devoid of the extraordinary evidence required to justify it—make any conceptual sense? Why is there not a plethora of sides for the ineffable emotions we possess to which neither side makes claim, like joy or curiosity or love? No, no, there is only *one* Force, my students, and it is the *same* Force. The Chatos Academy might claim to understand its origins, but like many ill-versed in the arts of empiricism, they confuse correlation for causation. Midichlo-

rians are nothing more than microbial parasites that evolved into symbiotic organelles feeding on Force energy. The Force is more likely to be the artificial construct of some long-vanished precursor race and is certainly not supernatural, for that very term is meaningless, as any verifiable phenomenon to which supernatural conceptualizations are attached is inevitably subsumed by an expansion in our scientific understanding. The Force is merely a poorly understood physical phenomenon that we must tame to our will just as we have tamed gravity and hyperspace.

"The heads of the Academies tell you to limit frivolous use of the Force simply because they fear the effects of overexposure as luddites of old feared electricity. Many understand what I learned long ago: that what they call the Bogan is simply the unrestrained Force, *the* Force when not deliberately limited through tiring, esoteric aspects of asceticism. They tell you to follow the *will* of the Force rather than impose *your* will upon it, knowing you will follow nothing but a reflection of your own precognition—perhaps guiding you in ways oft mistaken for luck, as if you were unlikely heroes in a play, but with no greater metaphysical meaning than birds following their instinctive attunement to weather patterns. They desire to contain the Force, suppress it, limit it, perhaps even kill it. Why do you think histories of old tell tales of Jedi heroes bearing powers beyond our ken—clear evidence that our knowledge of the Force has declined over millennia? Why is it that some of the most reactionary orthodoxists have begun to encourage restrictions on romance and reproduction when such a thing would conveniently *stem* the spread of Force-sensitivity; *even now* they press upon the Republic to mandate by law that sensitive children be stolen from their parents to be indoctrinated in ways that stifle the Force?

"Why do they tell us that death is a *natural* part of life and croon about an afterlife no one has ever seen when our loved ones could be saved through Forcecraft and science? Why should Jedi Watchmen *not* govern their star systems using their precognition to steer markets and politics in ways that will bring about the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people? Our resources are wasted on menial 'peacekeeping' missions and the erection of new Jedi cloisters to breed more useless knights to ape the parts of heroes, when, if only we applied the scientific method and experimented with using the Force to its fullest, we could create infinite resources and unimaginable technology using the old Force-fueled forges the ancient races knew how to build, destroy the great evils of death and disease, and usher in a new age of eternal utopia free of all mortal suffering!"

By the end of his speech, any student that hadn't already been swayed was now convinced that only *he* could show them the correct path to the Force. Soon enough, he was teaching them Force abilities they could practice, ways to use their passions to fuel the imposition of their will upon the Force, claiming such new powers would restore ruined worlds, heal the sick, and maybe even put an end to death's harvest.

Before the year was out, a scandal emerged when it was discovered that a group of students were using the Force in disturbing ways and betting on which summoned entity, the Pit Horror, Howler, or Shambler would win a fight set up in the school gymnasium. Despite the property damage and injuries caused by the escape of two of

the creatures, the students were proud of what they'd accomplished, believing they had created them *ex nihilo* out of their imaginations.

In the company of his fellow academicians, Danar feigned a hardline stance against those who strayed from the official channels of education—for he'd learned from the mistakes of Xendor—while in private, he praised their skills, promising that their next step would delve into life-extension. This piqued the interest of one member, who up till now had remained in the background.

His name was Ortan Cela.

Cela had considered seeking emotional support when he discovered the Xendor Club. He'd lost his father and brother when some business transaction had gone awry and his mother had died giving birth to him. But in the club he found a new home.

To keep face in the midst of the growing controversy exploited by the media, the Academy was forced to expel the recalcitrant students from the Jedi Order. Rather than quell the storm, this only led to an angry pushback on the part of the students and their parents who protested.

Danar made a show of quitting the Ossus Academy in solidarity with his students. Tulak Hord and other teachers followed suit. Danar's book—published a short time later—exposed the political motivations behind the expulsions and highlighted the severe restrictions the Jedi placed on unorthodoxy. It also exposed the larger public to his teachings, as he knew it would, which were framed in such a way as to seem like a mere alternate interpretation of the Force. Though some saw the dangers in his ideas, for those who had not been part of that year's student body, they were as a revelation.

So did Professor Danar's Xendor Club become the Xendor Academy on Alsakan.

THE SECOND GREAT SCHISM

Ajunta Pall had by this time become so convinced of the righteousness of their cause—and so incensed by the Council's decree of expulsion—that he sought out his former master, Anya Stusea, to protest the Council's thoughtless and unjust actions. It had been Stusea who had tasked him to infiltrate the Xendor Club at the behest of the Steward of First Knowledge, Homonix Rectonia. Feeling responsible for Pall, Stusea brought him before Rectonia to plead his case. While Master Rectonia had many great qualities, a restrained tongue had never been amongst them. Thinking Pall had internalized more than he should have from Danar's lessons, Rectonia made a fateful error in judgment, accusing Pall of moral weakness and selfish ambition and Stusea of being blind to his manipulations. Pall's temper flared, and as the argument burst into a shouting match, he gave vent to his frustrations and called upon the Dark Side to hurl the ear-piercing Rectonia back, causing the Steward's head to strike a cherished objet d'art that hung on the back wall. Homonix Rectonia was dead.

Ajunta Pall's journey to the Dark Side had taken its first real leap. Pall was jailed, but this only made him a martyr around which his fellow students rallied. "So adamant are the Jedi to suppress nonconformist views that they attack and imprison

a student" was the narrative initially spread by a small holonet news station until it gained traction, causing the expelled students—now convinced of their victimhood—to gather support from teachers, parents, and fellow students. The wealthier amongst them traveled from planet to planet, gaining political support in systems predisposed to believing that "pitiable young Jedi were oppressively being persecuted by a corrupt and complacent Order."[210]

Unlike the First Great Schism, there were now forces at work looking to weaken the Republic and its Jedi protectors, who saw the movement as an ideal conflict to exploit. The thousand-year Subterra Period had drawn to a close after the mapping of new regions in the galactic south and the extension of supply lines to the Rishi Maze. But this had led to a rise in lawlessness due to conflicts with hostile races, the stories of which terrified many citizens who felt betrayed by the Jedi and Republic who they said weren't doing enough to protect them. That this lawlessness was oftentimes the result of belligerent Republic explorers and their exploitative practices was less well known.

Over the next three years, hundreds of protesting students turned to thousands, and not a few turned to violence, enough that the Jedi were tasked to build a special penitentiary that could hold those they captured. This station, constructed in the Diab system, was called The Prism.

For Danar, it was called *opportunity*. While making a loud outcry against the injustices and very existence of The Prism, at the same time he saw to it that Ajunta Pall and several others were broken out a day before a malfunction opened all of the hatches on the outer hull, venting the oxygen and killing the prisoners. The mysterious deaths of the prisoners became part of the scandal of the times, with the Jedi framed as having murdered their unarmed ideological opponents.

Referred to in various times and places as the Hundred-Year Darkness, the Black War, the Thirteenth Alsakan Conflict, and the Second Great Schism, the conflict was sparked by increasing violence on both sides, culminating in the Republic's declaration of war against those who were termed the *Heresiarchs*. Few would ever learn that it was Master Danar who had orchestrated it from the beginning.

Seen as legendary, the Heresiarchs were uplifted by sections of the media and activist groups on civilized worlds as mythic icons of utilitarian philosophy championing the many over the few, just as their powers saw them elevated as magicians and gods on aboriginal frontiers; while others, in their vehement rejection of the Heresiarchs, became poisoned by that same spirit of bitterness that the Dark Side feeds on.

The war gave the Sith Lord a useful cover for his actions as the Republic borders drew back in the face of the Heresiarch Jedi and the monstrosities they raised. Republic oversight outside the Colonies in the north and east became largely theoretical, to the point that the Heresiarchs stormed Balmorra and attacked Coruscant with the assistance of Alsakan, which had been the Heresiarchs' headquarters for much of the war.

[210] Outrage was further stoked when it was uncovered that certain Jedi Masters, noticing the usefulness of the mildest of the forbidden techniques, were using some of the very practices they had proscribed.

The Way of the Dark ever called Darth Dreadwar forward to certain tasks, but Ku'ar Danar was quietly developing his own stratagem. He traveled to Arkania, where his credentials and wealth saw him welcomed with open arms and where his contributions to various institutes of science made him a local hero. All the while, in the frozen Arkanian wastes, he ordered the construction of the Great Library of Veeshas Tuwan, and there he delivered scores of forbidden lore along with the best Master Geneticists of his time—and the most amoral. They secretly performed crossbreeding tests with the Arkanians. In this way had the Quermian been engineered from the Xexto, and so did the blood of Arkania run Sith red. More pernicious results came from Bataal Bandu and the Forbidden Corruptors who were sent out to spread Sith teachings to the galaxy in secret while a mysterious offshoot, the Silent Ones, settled on Mykän, for which they were later known as the Mykë. From the deadliest of these arose the Azrayl who were known as the End Lords.

Sorzus Syn, Ajunta Pall, Remulus Dreypa, Karness Muur, XoXaan, Tulak Hord, and other leaders who later lost their lives in the war continued to meet with Danar on Arkania, Alsakan, and via the odd communication amulets he'd given them. As their professor, he had already acquainted them with certain aspects of ancient lore, but now he delved far deeper, teaching them the dark history of the Sith that he knew.

From this and her visions, Sorzus Syn learned how to invoke the fell brood of El'Shuddem that she called Sith Wyrms, Exogorths fed on the life-force of their victims, harvested for use in rituals involving vitality and longevity. This provided the Heresiarchs a justification for war on the grounds that it was for the greater good. But never were such experiments used to help the common man. Instead, Sorzus Syn would learn to summon the harrowing monsters they called Leviathans, which drunk the spirits of slaughtered Jedi and stored them in their blasphemous blister pods.

It was not long afterwards that Danar presented a peculiar, conical soul-snare carved in honor of the "great logician Apothem" to which he ordered a growing collection of thousands of spirits transferred. "This war will not be won through the slog of politics and martial might," he promised, "but in a single moment of unprecedented arcana that shall require many ingredients. Domination of the mundane realm, as the Jedi and Republic crave, is a fool's dream compared to domination of the Force, for when ultimate knowledge of the Cosmos is obtained, healing the galaxy and lifting the curse of death will be as simple a thing as rewriting the rules of reality with the flick of a finger."

Pall, however, was having doubts and feeling beset by guilt. His lover had convinced him that now was the time to get out while he still could. It was no coincidence that at the very same time that he was intending to leave the Heresiarchs and start life anew, Danar invited the leaders of the Heresiarchs to an important ceremony. There, he presented Pall with a treasured artifact known as the Sword of Shahar, an ancient double-bladed weapon said to have been fashioned in some remote time by the sons of the gods. Pall could feel without even touching it that it contained some kind of unnatural life. To reject the blade, particularly in front of the other apprentices of

Danar, would be seen as craven and possibly betray his intent to leave. Danar's unctuous smile seemed to suggest as much. So with feigned gratitude, he took it.

The moment he grabbed its hilt, he felt a spike of ice travel up his arm and through his body, and in his mind a voice said, *Well met, Ajunta Pall!* When Pall inquired who he was, the voice said cryptically, *I am that which grips the heart in fright, hearkens night, and silences the light. As you have chosen me, so do I choose you!*

Ever after, his course was changed, for he no longer felt the desire to leave, but rather irritation and unquenchable anger—not just at Danar but at everyone and everything. At the end of his unhappy life, he would come to recognize the unnatural influence the sword had wielded over his brittle and broken spirit.

Ku'ar Danar shortly afterwards began an affair with Sorzus Syn and conferred on her the star charts leading to the worlds of the Sith. Curious, Syn traveled to the various places indicated. Of all the fallen Jedi of this period, Sorzus Syn was the first to know that Danar was playing sides, doling out some secrets to some and other secrets to others. Most interesting was that he knew she knew and confided even more in her. "You are set apart from the others," he told her, "for you will be a vassal queen under our rule… or even greater if Graush or I should fall!"

Mordantly she asked, "And why should your pet fall?"

"Dathka Graush is wise in all ways but one. He indulges his son who he plans to raise up as his successor… Things will not go as he thinks."

"When do they ever?" Syn returned dourly.

THE OBELISK OF THE AMBRIAN EMPRESS

Midway into the Hundred-Year Darkness, Darth Dreadwar traveled to Ambria where he met the much-heralded Kára Volshe, Empress of the Vahla and an ambitious sorceress who came from a line of Witch-Queens stemming back to the earliest wars on Drômencas. With the dark arts passed on to her from a succession of ancestors and a copy of the scarce *Elder Tablets,* she had accomplished much in her time, but the thing she was most proud of was her transformation of the indigenous squamates into Hssiss guardian beasts who loyally flanked her everywhere she went.

The Vahla were a mixed race born of the multiple indigenous sapients of Ambria whom Volshe had conquered and fostered. As a devout acolyte of Vahl, Volshe's approach to her subjects would remain unique amongst Sith rulers until Sorzus Syn followed in her footsteps, after which it would be implemented to a degree by Arkadia Calimondra. Volshe's people loved her, and for good reason: she loved them in return, implementing wise policies that actually elevated the quality of their lives. And she suffered no fools. When wealthy landowners, militarists, manufacturers, and investors offered to contribute to her coffers in exchange for policies that would help them but hurt her people or planet, she smiled broadly and proceeded to boil, roast, or asphyxiate them as the mood suited her, giving their corpses to her happy Hssiss.

But their unlimited resources meant there were always more of their ilk applying pressure and threatening war, so that when her people demanded that she be included

amongst the pantheon of gods, she found an incantation that would make their wishes come true and aid her with these external threats. This was the beginning of the Great Obelisk which would elevate her as Avatar of the Living Goddess Vahl, whom she'd been named in honor of.

But sabotage and frequent setbacks caused the Great Obelisk (or *Viscretus Tuwan*, as the Vahla called it) to take close to two centuries to build. The Empress had mastered life-extension, but there were limits, and she could ill afford to wait much longer. As it neared completion, Dreadwar warned her that what she was attempting was amongst the most dangerous of undertakings and that she should be prepared for things to not go as planned. Volshe appreciated his concern, but she had been a Witch Queen for longer than he had been alive and assured him that she had everything under control, suggesting to him that instead of worrying after her, he should attain similar mastery so he could join her as an equally divine being when she achieved apotheosis.

Kára's plan gave Danar an idea. Searching through her gramaries, he discovered that she had chosen Ambria for a reason. During the Cosmic Wars, the veil between this world and a potent dimension that her scroll called the Netherworld was thin. Ambria was not the only world in which this was true, and he began searching out other systems where the walls had thinned and came upon Nilrebmah, Mustafar, and Tascollan.

After a brief courtship, the two rulers wed, and the union between the Sith and the Witch-Queens was reestablished after millennia of estrangement and acrimony. Danar and Volshe traveled frequently to Korriban and Nilrebmah II where they were heralded by the Sith civilisation as the *Dan'ari* and *On'ari*—meaning the Dread Lord and Witch Queen (or Lady of Sorcery)—of Dentari and the Stenness Node.

Over the course of the next twenty years, Kára Volshe and Ku'ar Danar grew estranged and separated. She was used to governing as she knew best and did not appreciate his constant interference. For his part, he did not like being disobeyed. They remained associates, however. During this same period, a daughter, Elutheria, was born to Volshe by Tamuzi, her Tetsujin protector whom she'd fallen in love with. Tamuzi was one of the greatest warriors she'd ever known, and despite all the bloody battles he'd won over the years, his heart remained strong and tender towards those he loved. Elutheria was put in the care of a faithful Sith governess and was taught by her mother and other tutors, but her warrior training came directly from her father.[211]

After the passage of many years, the time had at last come to ascend the Great Obelisk. Then dealing with a worker uprising on Nilrebmah XIII, Danar urged her to wait until he could join and assist her in the endeavor. Volshe reluctantly agreed, but in her heart, she knew she could wait no longer. When he arrived, she would surprise him with her great achievement.

Climbing the Secret Stair alongside her beloved Tamuzi to the pinnacle of the Great Obelisk, she began to perform the proscribed rites that would bind the world to her will and their souls to one another.

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[211] Pronounced *Ta-moo-zai*, meaning "the true son," akin to *Tammuz-an*, "the true children of heaven."

But as they faced each other intently, hands clasped, Volshe perceived that something was amiss. As the powerful energies danced and crackled around their bodies, they found themselves immobile. And then she knew! Someone had secretly sabotaged the Obelisk in such a way that she—for all her powers—hadn't detected it! Now trapped, they were unable to control the forces she had unleashed.

Whoever had done this would pay dearly!

Her heart broke as she saw her Tamuzi's face wracked in grief and fury as he struggled with his inability to protect her from what was happening. But she had to put that aside to focus. Even as the Obelisk leeched their energies and depleted her powers, she reached out—*Even now they laugh and congratulate one another on having beaten me. They are in for a surprise!* Agonized as she was, she harnessed her rage to channel some of the uncontrolled currents and telepathically communicated the imprint of her enemies unto the Hssiss. As she began to fade, she was pleased to know that her pets were racing off to tear apart all those who'd plotted against her.

Her adamant spirit stricken and ripping out of her and her lover, she locked eyes with him, mentally willing him to toss aside his grief and false belief of having failed her and instead breathe as one. *Pain does not matter,* she instructed. *The past does not matter. The future does not matter. All that matters is the bond between you and me.* This mantra they repeated in unison until all went dark.

Save for the Hssiss, all the living beings on Ambria were either permeated with the Dark Side or devoured by the spell gone awry. Danar would return to find nothing but ash-laden bones and grimacing skulls. But the Obelisk itself held an altogether different energy, a kind of surge that did not feel like the Dark Side but something else, something that held a trace of Kára Volshe. Dismissing it as childish reverie, he moved on.

Many of the Vahla on Ambria had perished, but a remnant fortunate enough to have been offworld at the time joined their brethren on Tirahn to herald their Empress as the chosen embodiment of Vahl (this movement would be revived years later with the return of Belot). But while they blamed the Jedi for the ritual's failure, the historians of later days did not take into account who Queen Volshe actually was and put the blame on her so that she came to be regarded as "the Destroyer of Ambria." It is said, however, that the Vahla brought her back to correct this calumny, and in the millennia ahead, mysteriously, Volshe and Tamuzi returned to the land of the living.[212]

XOXAAN AND THE BLACK LEGIONS

As Danar gradually relaxed his mask around those with whom he communicated, revealing himself no longer as a mere professor with unusual views of the Force but as Darth Dreadwar, XoXaan grew apprehensive. As their teacher, he'd taught them of the ancient Sith and their manipulations during the Cosmic Wars. *But if he had been one of them all along, concealing it from the Academy and us alike, it puts all of his*

[212] The Vahla's suspicions were not without merit as Sith apotheosis was something the Jedi would interfere with, as with the "Wall of Light" rite which Kyle Katarn used to stop Jerec's ascension.

teachings in question… And if he'd lied about that, it stands to reason that he's lying about much more! She also didn't care for the increasing fanaticism she was seeing amongst his followers. How ironic that Dreadwar's loyalists—who'd begun calling themselves the Dark Path—had become even more doctrinaire than the Jedi!

Though XoXaan wouldn't let that stop her from taking advantage of the life-extension rituals he'd taught his first wave of followers, it was time to do some digging.

Her people were uncannily good at this. She'd been raised as a foundling and assumed by her mother to be some random near-Human hybrid, of which there were thousands across the galaxy. Her discovery that she was of the Umbaran-Anzati hybrid race known as Palliduvans was a dismaying revelation to her, given the quasi-mythical nature of the still-feared Anzati. So she kept this fact hidden until she was old enough to stop caring. Over time, she became proficient at spotting others who were hiding things. With these skills, she now trailed Sorzus Syn, though that wasn't hard. Having always thought herself smarter than everyone else, Syn was cocky.[213]

XoXaan followed her to the world of Ambria, where some terrible thing had occurred during what was being called the Obelisk Massacre. Her suspicion gave rise to investigation and deduction. A little more digging revealed that the Great Obelisk was intended as part of a ritual. Either Volshe had made a terrible mistake or her project had been sabotaged. She could think of several who might've benefited from her death. And *most curiously*, Syn had been Dreadwar's mistress while he'd been married to Volshe, and so too had she had a paramour during that time. This was not uncommon for royals and many cultures thought little of it, *but had Syn known?*

Continuing to follow the trail, XoXaan next found herself in the Nilrebmah system where she posed as a worker, using makeup to conceal her tattoos and a common, gray-hooded robe to cover her head, a simple disguise that made her all but invisible.

So the old fraud has had his own tower built, no doubt for the very same purpose. Funny that he failed to mention that *in all his many lectures!*

There was one last stop to make: the Great Library of Veeshas Tuwan of Arkania. She'd heard of it from Danar himself, who'd promised that one day all of his best students would study there and learn from the most esoteric practices of the ancient Sith. *Let us see what exactly is required to attain the apotheosis he seeks.*

Several weeks and a few dead librarians later, XoXaan returned to spread the word: "Danar has been playing us, using us as pawns while prolonging the war rather than trying to win it—all in order to manipulate his followers so that he might channel our life-forces into his Dread Monolith to make himself a god!"

And they call my *people vampires!*

XoXaan's efforts to expose her former master arguably saved the war for the Republic. It certainly saw the Heresiarchs fracture along three factions:

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[213] After the Great Hyperspace War, Palliduvan offshoots from Serepentis would resettle on Kyoloria, where their worship of Yammka devolved into a mere Soulworm cult in much the same way that neo-primitivism had reduced Typhojem to Pomojema.

The Dark Path: The Dreadwar loyalists clung to his teachings and the sinister legacy of the *Darth* lineage that he and Graush had begun; they did not care about the Dread Monolith and did not believe that he would harm them.

The Black Legions: Inspired by the Black Knights and Legions of Lettow, XoXaan and Ajunta Pall were the ones who felt most betrayed by Danar but who were in too deep to go back to being Jedi. Opposing the Dark Path on ideological grounds, seeing them as an existential threat to the galaxy, they now considered themselves True Jedi and appointed Pall as their Master.

The Warlords: Created by Tulak Hord, who declared independence from both groups, the Warlords agreed with XoXaan that Dreadwar was a threat, but disagreed with the crusade that she and the Black Legions waged. Hord's own group was splintered by opportunists who found themselves with influence enough to make themselves into wealthy lords who saw the Dark Path cultists and Black Legions as fanatical stumbling blocks to greater wealth and power.

These divisions were echoed on worlds across the galaxy where the deeper sociopolitical and philosophical divides exposed by the Hundred-Year Darkness saw planets and cultures polarize, with many including the Syleks of Syl having sided with the Heresiarchs out of grievances against the entrenched financial Core World elites and their associated lobbyists that encroached on Republic politics.

THE DREAD MONOLITH

The Star Forge above Abo had earlier been discovered by Darth Dreadwar, who revealed it to his Dark Path. With the Rakata reduced to cannibalistic primitives, Dreadwar's loyalists learned to forge droid armies and fleets to complement their genetic monstrosities, but Ajunta Pall had earlier gotten wind of this secret weapon, allowing the Black Legions time to counter it.

With these factions busy battling each other, Dreadwar next turned his attention to his project on Nilrebmah XIII, determined to not repeat Volshe's mistakes. The love she had for her subjects was a luxury that came at a cost. To attain true power, people had to be the means to an end. Her Great Obelisk was designed to draw its energies from the sun and four moons. Such a concept was typical of the witches of old who were connected to the natural forces. The Sith way was different. It dominated nature. *Ninmah Ixgûl*, aka. the Dread Monolith, would draw energy directly from the living—which is ironically what ended up happening with the Great Obelisk. Thus, he fueled the Black War conflict between the Heresiarchs and made himself into a target.

By design, those who rallied against him and his Dark Path had recently learned of his Nilrebmah redoubt from XoXaan. Syn had been overconfident, but he would make it serve his purposes. His enemies would come in droves to stop him. He needed only to time things right. Unfortunately, his supporters would suffer as well. The Black Legions were right about that. What they failed to see was that it was the duty of pawns to obey the king in all things. That meant they had to be manipulated into

place, and he invented a story to do just that: "By shifting Nilrebmah XIII to orbit around Nilrebmah XII, the Monolith will break the seal and open the Gates of Null! There, in the Immaterium of the Aether, the most ancient Sith will be freed to come forth and reward all of us with great wealth and power as they did in days of old!" It was a good lie because it was based on known legends, and it provided a reason for his actions and motivation for his followers, particularly the lower-caste Sith who mined the Silex of Nilrebmah X for use in constructing the Dread Monolith.

Unlike Volshe's Great Obelisk, the Dread Monolith came together far more quickly due to a workforce from three worlds and a less *tolerant* attitude than she had displayed. To guard the structure from saboteurs, Danar and the Sith Elders awakened the Energy Hydra, Vauvert, who had been cast into a deep sleep during the War of Temporal Planes. It was a spawn of some profane mating in olden times, but Danar didn't care about any of that. The creature would loyally serve him or burn.

To Dathka Graush, Dreadwar delegated the task of mystical protection. Encouraged by his master's achievement with Ninmah Ixgûl, Graush sought out the perfect Silex stone from which to construct his own special object. In his subterranean laboratory, he placed the bibelot in the athanor and used the *krimpfrûm* ritual described in Danar's spellbook, *From the Darkest Heart*, to infuse part of himself into the stone and part of the stone into him, all the while drawing from the planet to strengthen and crystallize it. The Silex resisted him, but this was expected. Unable to fight, the being withdrew into the metaphysical realm of its people, allowing Graush's foul presence to imprint itself. So was forged the rubylike crystal known as the Heart of Graush.

Now, with the arrival of his adversaries to kill him and his gathered allies to protect him, the time was at hand.

The musicians stirred the first discordant notes. The procession began. Then Dreadwar climbed the eight thousand steps into the great antechamber, holding aloft the Dark Heart of Graush in his left hand and the earlier-acquired Darkstaff of Rauggoth in his right. Finally, the words of the ritual were spoken.

On commanding the Dread Monolith to move Nilrebmah XIII out of its orbit and into rotation around Nilrebmah XII would take far more power than first anticipated, for the planets themselves resisted him as if they had a will of their own. This ritual, impossible for most, involved a triad of incantations, including *tîmurog* and *rakhkfrûm*, but with his Dark Side objects unleashed, he could more readily draw from the thousands of Sith who'd helped build the Monolith, the thousands of Warlords and Black Legions who'd come to stop him, and the planet itself!

Normally, the taking of life-energy had to be consensual to some degree; whether through deception, seduction, or cowardice didn't matter. Dreadwar didn't hold to that belief, but for those who opened themselves to the Dark Side—the thousands who'd come to this world in obeisance or opposition—their light had been driven out or weakened to such a point that only their inner darkness remained to resist… and Dreadwar's trap was far more powerful than their individual efforts at resistance. Too late, his loyalists saw how foolish they'd been as they were used as living batteries for the ambitions of a man who had only ever manipulated and used them.

As intended, the dark window into Illathurion was opened, but no gods came through with rewards of apotheosis as he'd told his cult. He didn't believe in a literal Illathurion, let alone ancient deities, viewing them as metaphors for scientific principles that would see him strengthened to the point of immortality. Therefore, he wasn't expecting any actual beings to arrive… and yet *something* did.

Dreadwar blinked incredulously as what appeared to be living shadows drew near, they of whom the stories said had no regard for mighty men or anything but the will of their own occluded masters. He dismissed them as a side-effect of his mind interfacing with the spell. But the illusions didn't disperse.

"You have *ssstrayed* from the path," a Shadow Demon taunted as they began tormenting his body, "laid out for you years before by the Outer One in his astral vault."

"You are *not* real!" Dreadwar screeched defiantly.

They laughed cruelly at that. "None but a caitiff fool would try and become a god after betraying the gods!" They chortled as they tore off bits of flesh and hair from his head and limbs: "No devotee of the eldritch powers are you! A *pledge* you made! All who would abandon the Way of the Dark for selfish gain *will pay the penalty of the Dark!"* So, Darth Dreadwar began to die, and nothing he could do would stop it.

But while the Dread Monolith continued depleting the life-forces of all around, channeling them through the Heart and Staff, it gained power unto itself and began to pull at the Shadow Beings until they too were drawn in, leaving Ku'ar Danar both destroyed and transformed at the same time. With his eyes turning white, he looked in anguish upon the galaxy and uttered, "Mine!" Then, his eyes bled out of his skull, and his flesh melted off the muscles and bones.

In its place stood one like a Shadow Being.

The wraith of dark energy that had once been Ku'ar Danar now looked upon Darth Graush writhing on the ground like all the others before him who were now smoking corpses, staving off death only due to the connection he had to the crystal he'd fashioned. It occurred to Dreadwar then to prevent his most loyal apprentice from dying, knowing he might continue to prove useful. Taking action, he directed the remaining life-forces from the dying Sith into the Heart crystal. The strain had proved too much for his apprentice's own heart, so with his ectoplasmic hands, he opened Graush's chest and removed his failing heart, replacing it with the rutilant crystal. Arcane currents reshaped it into a functioning muscular organ which would give his apprentice—if he survived—newfound strength and vitality.

Dreadwar's partial victory was interrupted. The scream in the Force from all the horror occurring on Nilrebmah XIII brought forth Horliss-Horliss from across the great divide. Surveying the wicked creature who had foolishly done this and turned himself into a thing of shadow, he imprisoned his black spirit to the Monolith. The Celestial then released the dead and stolen life-forces of the silica stones, sealing the tear in the seal to Otherspace and setting the damaged worlds on the path to health.

After the dust of the pandemonium settled, Dreadwar learned to his horror that as potent as he'd become, he could not depart the world to which he was now bound. Upon recovering, Graush grasped that he couldn't help his master and raised the dead

into a soulless army to guard the Monolith in place of the Energy Hydra which had burrowed deep underground to escape the ritual. All Dreadwar could do while he pondered a means of escape was think and sleep, and sleep he did for a long time.

THE HEART OF GRAUSH

Dathka Graush relocated to Naos III. As king, he went on to marry several additional wives and produce heirs, bringing forth the rare, red-skinned Lethan Twi'leks who remained in great numbers on Naos III.[214]

Yet, his love was foremost for his firstborn, Prince Hakagram.

King Graush's heart continually troubled him as if it had a will of its own. Perpetually cross, Graush paid no heed to the red flags until he was killed by an unknown assailant. Rumors pointed to Prince Hakagram and his wife, Princess Elutheria Volshe. After her consecration, Queen Elutheria sent her brutish husband to Korriban to rule the Sith savages there. She would rule Naos III alone. No idle queen was she. While serving at court by day, by night she moved about as Itruria the Veiled One, known throughout Naos as a ruthless assassin of the unjust and liberator of heads from bodies. Having learnt from her mother, she would brook no rivals, and that included her father-in-law, who might have governed in cruelty for centuries longer.

Bound to the crystal which had served as his heart, now buried with him in his sarcophagus, Dathka Graush's embittered spirit lingered on in impotence. It wrestled with Sorzus Syn who came to examine the almandine crystal. She overcame him but found the accursed Heart of Graush troublesome and returned it to its tomb where it stayed for uncounted centuries until a year before the Battle of Yavin.

Naz Felyood was a pirate and treasure-seeker. During a game of Sabacc, Vima-Da-Boda prophesied that he would go to Korriban and find a great treasure. Five years hence, the *Jynni's Virtue* was forced to land on Korriban in order to escape an Imperial patrol. While his crewmates went about making repairs, he set off to explore the nearby Valley of Golg, and there he fell into a crypt. No pauper's grave was this but the tomb of fourteen Sith wizards, including that of Dathka Graush. In the lightless grotto within the king's partly open sarcophagus, Felyood found the Dark Lord's treasures: a sword, amulet, holocron, and most curious of all, a rubylike heart. Unaware of what it housed, the corrupt pirate took it, and it in turn took him.

Now housed in Felyood's body, the unclean spirit called to the fallen kings of Korriban, and on that very day they arose from their mouldering crypts. The Lost Ones of Korriban would ensure that any additional intruders would meet their end.

To no avail did First Mate Babbnod Luroon and the crew fight off the hordes of the ghastly dead who preyed on them as, one by one, they were killed and brought back to horrid unlife. Seeing their doom, Luroon set the charges and blew up *Jynni's Virtue*, destroying many of the Lost Ones with it. When she found Felyood, she knew then that

[214] History has recorded an unusual affinity for the Force amongst red-skinned Twi'leks, including numerous Lethan Sith such as Darth Atroxa, Dark Jedi like Alora, and Jedi Master Zhar Lestin.

something *else* inhabited his body. There was no time for shock or fear. Feigning ignorance, she got close enough to rip the Heart of Graush out of his grasp and run off.

But Graush had not poured all of his spirit into Felyood, wanting first to ensure his host was compatible. And the part of him that still inhabited the crystal called out to the surviving Lost Ones to hunt down the interloper. Days passed as Luroon evaded her pursuers across the hostile lands. But she knew this could not go on. When at last they confronted and cornered her, the crystal had already been hidden in a place where they would never find it. Without the Heart, Felyood recovered enough to gain back his wits, but the part of Graush's spirit that remained in him would never let the pirate rest or die until he recovered it.

From the ruins of the Temple of Korman Lao, Lord Cronal came to track down the Heart of Graush, one of many old treasures he sought to recover. With his particular talents it had not taken long to find, and there, hidden in the tomb of Darth Cruor, it lay. Back at his lair, Cronal dominated the shattered spirit of Graush, commanding its secrets. And so Lord Blackhole learned of Dreadwar and the Silex and many things…

THE DAWN OF MANDALORE

Though seemingly unconnected, the pacifist and pureblooded Taung groups would play a critical role in the future of the Sith Empire. The Taung had long before departed Roon for a world they called Manda, a name that meant "self-rule." There, they resettled and spent long millennia in relative peace. But when the unrest of the Second Great Schism reached Manda, their political and ethical debates resurfaced. The desire for a sole ruler (elected for a single term to address a specific situation) won the vote, forcing the council to give way to the one heralded as Mand'alor, who is now variously remembered (once his unprecedented lifelong leadership passed to a successor) as Mandalore the Conqueror, Mandalore the Great, or simply Mandalore the First.

Once more, the Taung split into opposing factions. To their credit, they did not fight each other but separated peacefully. The history of the Mandalars of Manda and the later Mandalorians divides at this point.

The Mandalars would come into conflict with three races, the Kraytons, Thilibies, and Zaitecs, inaugurating a thousand-year feud that would be settled less violently in a Ballblazer knock-out tournament.[215]

Mand'alor led his faction off Manda to conquer worlds ruled by despots and monsters. In this way were the fiendish Gargoyles of Gargon, Tlönians of Tlön, Sobekk of Shrob, and Chistori of Ordo decimated (though a remnant of the Chistori fled to Rokirex and became the Krex). So too did they help the galaxy when they defeated the unholy Harpies of Akaan and, in the same system, they took out the wicked Wurd of Werda and the Negs of Nog, though these battles nearly cost them all. [216]

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[215] The sport of Ballblazer is rich in martial tradition, derived from the training manoeuvres of pilots during the Great Madness, and is highly revered by warrior cultures as a result. The Faruun would later develop a variant called Masterblazer, which was popular with spectators but regarded as a dishonourable departure from ancient traditions by Ballblazer purists.

[216] *Akaans*/*Akaana* refer to the Harpies. Hence, the Mandalorian words for war and battle is *Akaana*.

Of the fierce giants of Kanteletar (later Mandallia), they converted them to their cause. On Shogun, Mand'alor and his armies destroyed the Mazinger, giant robot warriors of the Tetsujin, a banished sect of Atrisians who yet worshipped Zhothaqquah, the Black Thing, and drove them out to Pûrgrothiá.

Tragically, the three-snouted Ithullans (a cousin race to the Cragmoloids and Ubuugan) were governed by suspicious, jealous leaders who stirred up their people against them. Though hostilities ended in a cease fire, the Ithullans would carry their grudge against the Mandalorians for millennia, and oft spread rumors about them.

At this time, however, they were not militaristic and only fought those known to be warlike or cruel, and so they refrained from engaging in battle with any of the twenty-five aligned Nessie races. However, their expansion throughout the Mandalore sector, which resulted in diplomatic and less-diplamatic conflict with agents of the beleaguered Republic, was seen as aiding the Heresiarchs.

Having taken the system, they at last settled on Tal'tar, which they christened Mandalore (*Manda'yaim* in their tongue) after their leader. There, they'd face their greatest challenge, the ancient Tar'tara, commonly referred to as Mythosaurs; these were gigantic reptoids before whom cities tumbled like blocks. These creatures had earlier driven out the Taltorians, and though monstrous beyond measure, kings of the land and sea, in battle after battle with the horned titans, tame the Mythosaurs the Mandalorians did, and from this victory they fashioned their sigil and renamed themselves Mandalorians.

Determining that in a galaxy ravaged by war, they must become crusaders like Kad Ha'rangir of old, Mand'alor set his people on a new path, and in this it was said he was spurred on by a mysterious priestess, one of the Warriors of Shadow who had betrayed the old ways for cthonic connections in the far off Unknown Regions, whispering of strange prophecies and visions of the Taung intertwined with *Kuar* and the *dar'jetii*, a Taung neologism for "dark Jedi."

While those who'd remained behind on Manda would not be associated with the later history of the Mandalorians, nonetheless, in having cherished the peaceful ways of their ancestors, they influenced the far future, for the division between peacemaker and warrior, between egalitarian rule and authoritarian rule, between marauder and defender would trouble Mandalorian culture throughout their history. While they are most often thought of today as bloodthirsty raiders, the truth is far more complex, and the accounts of their peoples shows a far more noble spirit, one that relentlessly strove to return to the balance once found in the old ways of the Taung.

THE BATTLE OF CORBOS

The Hundred-Year War was racing to its climax, an end that would erupt in sliced limbs and shattered bones on the mining world of Corbos at the very site of the ruins of Xendor's ancestral stronghold.

As Dreadwar couldn't allow the Warlords to grow into serious rivals, he'd sent a preemptive force to decimate their numbers, forcing them into a war they hadn't wanted to fight. Those who were left of them turned their considerable resources

against the Dark Path, bleeding credits and followers. The Black Legions, whose numbers had been devastated on Nilrebmah XIII, went even further, forging a truce with the Jedi to help eradicate the hated Dreadwar cultists.

When word reached the Dark Path that Dreadwar had not only failed in his experiment but had murdered his most loyal followers, it was as if their fighting spirit went out of them. With Dreadwar no longer controlling the dejarik board, everything fell in a succession of stunning collapses. A sea of lightsabers of every stripe could be seen that fateful day. The Dark Path made their final stand on the very place that had once seen the Legions of Lettow clash against their brethren in the First Great Schism, and in the tumult, each struggled not for ideological control but survival.

Despite the monstrous fleets generated by the Star Forge; despite the self-perpetuating armies of infectious, undead Shamblers, spectral Howlers, and flaming Pit Horrors; despite the Fellowship of Kooroo and the Cold Coil of Kopa Khan, vassals of the True Sith who'd been sent forth from the Unknown Regions to aid the Heresiarchs and weaken the Republic; despite all of this, it was not enough to tip the scales in their favor. None could withstand the Jedi who, alongside an affronted and scrupulous Republic Navy, rained the purifying fire of light down upon them.[217]

To make matters worse, other shadowy factions had been watching, and the End Lords entered the fray, slaughtering their dark rivals by the hundreds before vanishing as mysteriously as they'd arrived. With the enemy having done the bulk of their work for them, the Jedi sealed the fate of all those who'd turned to the Dark Side.

Wearied by a century of campaigning and single-handedly besting more than a dozen Jedi on the field that day, High General Ajunta Pall could only laugh maniacally as the final hammer blow fell. The Hundred-Year Darkness was over.

It had been the longest, largest, and bloodiest war in Republic history to that date, and the reason for which some Jedi historians considered it the First of the Great Schisms, regarding the earlier heresies of Xendor and Dread Rur as Lesser Schisms.

In the end, twelve survivors surrendered. Three were Dreadwar loyalists: Sorzus Syn, Ortan Cela, and Remulus Dreypa, the last surviving admiral. Two were leaders of rank from the Black Legions: XoXaan and Ajunta Pall. Under them were Bo Vanda, Broodica, and the brothers Onterr, who had stolen the caliginous armours and Hendanyn death masks of Adas and Xendor from Dreadwar's stronghold in Adascopolis. Tulak Hord and Karness Muur were rival Warlords. Former Jedi Shadow, Randon Rel, was unknown to the rest. The identities of the fallen Jedi were then purged from all Republic datacores, though some were later recovered in the centuries that followed, as were their murky deeds and destructive acts.

[217] The Abo Forge was later rediscovered by Darth Revan. The Forge above Tulpaa lay abandoned for millennia, but when Sith Sorcerer Raspir was released over two decades after the battle of Endor, he had Elder Ruthic reactivate it. The Forge above the Gunninga Gap remains in use by the True Sith to this day, lifting stars and nebulae and turning the Unknown Regions into a cosmic playground.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SIX

DYNASTIES OF THE DEPRAVED

EXALTATION OF THE EXILES

The once great civilization of Korriban had begun to tarnish under the harsh rule of Hakagram Graush, with the legendary exploits of their ancestors seen not as the disasters they were but as a lost zenith in which Sith ruled across starry seas. Into this period of longing, beginning in 6900 BBY, came the fallen Jedi survivors of the Hundred-Year Darkness.

Weakened by internal rivalries that had cost uncounted lives and resources, the twelve remaining darksiders were now in sour moods as they were taken from the dungeons of the Jedi Temple, loaded into a single ship in Force-dampening chains, and sent off beyond the borders of the Republic to endlessly soar the spacelanes. Most would've preferred a quick death, but after all the harm they'd caused, most in the Republic were glad to know they'd suffer. Sorzus Syn couldn't imagine a worse fate.

Fortunately for them, XoXaan had hidden skills. Tapping into their collective strength, she managed to physically break their bonds. It would little have mattered but for Syn, who knew of a world where they might go. Then it was left to the expertise of Randon Rel to carefully circumvent the navicomputer's fail-safes, well aware that a glitch could easily reduce the twelve of them to charred corpses. Once Syn was at the controls, she plotted the course.

"Korriban!" Broodica complained in response to Syn's announcement. "Where in the blasted galaxy is that?"

"It's one of the homeworlds of the old Sith," she replied.

"And how exactly do *you* know *that*?" Remulus Dreypa charged.

"Unlike you, Remulus, she listens and learns!" Karness Muur spat in response, annoyed that Dreypa had lost none of his boorishness in the war.

"Why don't you tell me that to my face, old man!" Dreypa threatened tempestuously, standing up.

"Enough!" Ajunta Pall silenced them, putting power behind the word. Resentfully, they ceased arguing and started out into space. Once in orbit around the crimson desert, Pall continued. "If this is indeed a Sith world, we are going to have to put aside our differences and work together. Otherwise, we *will* die here."

"I, for one, have no intention of dying on this dustball!" growled Ortan Cela.

"Nor I, but surely these primitive savages are no threat to us," Tulak Hord replied, picturing half-dressed brutes with spears.

"Are you all deaf?" charged Bo Vanda, glowering at them. "Can you not hear the world screaming in the Dark Side?"

Xoxaan had always known Bo Vanda to be sensitive to spectral world.

"You're insane!" Cela snapped, shooting her an ugly look.

"No," XoXaan declared. "It is a premonition… dread is coming upon the galaxy."

"I don't give a *blast* about the galaxy!" exclaimed Dreypa.

"I hear it too," Syn stated. "XoXaan is right. It is the darkness that will consume us all if we are not careful. Do you remember Danar's lessons?"

"Before he tried to murder us?" growled Hord.

"He is dead, and good riddance to him," Syn replied, "but that does not mean his teachings were without value. He said that the light and dark *both* seek servants: one to serve the lesser beings of this galaxy, the other to serve chaos. To become masters and not servants, both must serve *us*."

"What matters now is that we get free of this accursed ship," Muur replied.

"Yes," stated Pall. "But to remain free, we must have an understanding. The past is dead and all of our ideologies with it. There is a Force-sensitive population below and a king who will no doubt see us as a threat. We are going to have to remove him."

"Since you and Syn have the advantage over us," XoXaan replied, "tell us: what *king* is this, and how is it you know so much of this world?"

"His name is Hakagram Graush," Syn revealed. "He is the son of Dathka Graush, who had been Dreadwar's right-hand man, and no greater brute have you met."

"I doubt that," Muur said sarcastically. Dreypa bristled, glaring daggers at him.

"Then I suggest we make a grand entrance!" declared Broodica mischievously.

"How do you suggest we do that?" Bo Vanda returned. "We're weaponless!"

The Onterr brothers sniggered at the Zabrak's ignorance. "Are we?" The two were inseparable and yet complete opposites in every way. XoXaan called the light-haired one "Passive" and the dark-haired one "Aggressive." It was said that none could face them in battle and live. They gleefully told the tale of how by means of the Force they'd identified guards sympathetic to their cause while Broodica used *persuasion* on them to retrieve the stored weapons and stow them aboard the transport vessel.

The prison-ship came down not far from the main city. Dusting themselves off, the darksiders pooled their respective talents to put on a show of strength, marching to the city's center and the most formidable of the temples there. Their first interaction with the natives went as well as could be expected from an insular, mistrustful people. They were not stupid and could feel the Exiles' power. They spoke the common tongue, so after the Exiles put down a few aggressive Korribani, their steward, Domoru Krev, called the Lord of War, came forward to speak with them. The Exiles had expected the Korribani to have maintained the teachings of Dreadwar and Graush and were surprised to find that they'd returned to their old beliefs. King Hakagram, as it turned out, was far from popular with the people, a detail Ajunta Pall would use when taking the place of the king and speaking to an honor culture in which strength was held in the highest regard but petty bullying was despised.

By the time the king arrived a month hence, demanding the Exiles be executed, the people stood back and laughed. Then the Exiles went into action. The public defeat of Hakagram Graush and his personal guards was a thing to behold, as the Korribani had only heard of such feats from the tales of Darth Dreadwar and Dathka

Graush, and they roared in approval when the tyrant was beheaded. Ajunta Pall, who had delivered the killing blow, was heralded as their new king, but more significantly, all of the Exiles were hailed as avatars of the Ancient Ones and emissaries of the Great Old Ones, and they bestowed on them the title of Dark Lords of the Sith. The twelve Dark Lords would later come to be known in history as:

Ajunta Pall, King of Korriban and Ziost, the Left Hand of Typhojem
XoXaan, Marchioness of the Black Legions and Queen of Anzat
Karness Muur, Lord of the Rakghouls
Tulak Hord, the Master of the Undying Darkness, Lord of Hate
D'chira and Mote Onterr, the black armored Brothers of the Black Legions
Remulus Dreypa, the Baron of Syngia
Randon Rel, the Ruin of Aggregaria
Sorzus Syn, the Sorceress of Sigil—Darth Sanguinus
Broodica, the Majestrix of Lehon—Darth Judicar
Bo Vanda, the Priestess of Iridonia—Darth Simi
Ortan Cela, the Lich King of Prakith—Darth Andeddu

Since the Korribanian Sith had for thousands of years raided and conquered their neighbouring worlds thinly spread out across the Stygian Caldera, the Exiles inherited a pre-established, largely unified civilization with only a smattering of tribes and kingdoms not under the late Hakagram Graush's control.

No longer Heresiarchs nor even Black Legions, Dark Path, or Warlords, the Exiles mordantly renamed themselves Dark Jedi or *Jen'jidai*, and, as they began breeding and expanding their influence, their empire was called the *Jendathk*.[218]

This conquest was accomplished fairly easily once they had the millions of Massassi warriors on their side, along with the Star Forge of Abo to create droid armies and fleets of ships. But they knew their real power came from the Dark Side, from the alchemy that could bring forth monstrosities and the dark magic that reanimated the dead.

Regarded then as the greatest duelist of the era, Tulak Hord agreed to take on as an apprentice Ortan Cela, who'd lost his prior master in the Battle of Corbos. Hord also began developing an artifact capable of performing *itsu-ashmûd* that would reduce the risk of harm to the user. In concert with the harvesting of the prisoners and slaves required, he hoped to extend the lifespan of the Exiles to centuries and ensure their Dark Empire would last for eternity. Karness Muur and Bo Vanda initially helped him with this spell, but as they developed their own theories and approaches, they began to work independently, deepening the rift between them.

[218] This translates to "Dark Empire," "Shadow Empire," or "Hidden Empire." Darth Sidious drew on that name for his own final regime, connoting his planned transition from a secular Galactic Empire to an explicit Dark Side theocracy for a renewed Golden Age of the Sith. Lumiya rejected the reborn Palpatine's legitimacy for having shed the trappings of the Sith path much like his forebear Vitiate had done.

The elevation in status puffed up the proud Baron Dreypa who, during their trimestral gathering on the throneworld of Ziost, questioned why they were not moving forward to attack the Republic and conquer them at last. "We now have an empire with which to defeat them! We are the Dark Lords of the Sith, the most powerful magi to have ever lived. We need but to embrace the teachings of the Dark Path as we once had, ally again with the Cold Coil, and reconnect with our brethren out in the Unknown Reaches, and we can accomplish this and so much more!"

"Are you so desperate to return to the lap of Dreadwar?" XoXaan reprimanded. "After what you know he did?"

"His betrayal was abhorrent," Dreypa acknowledged, "but that doesn't make the Dark Path wrong. We can learn nothing more from these *provincial* Sith."

"Perhaps, but it may be that this Dark Path is what led Dreadwar to madness," Pall noted. "I do not see his methods or ideology as an example for us to follow."

"*I'm* not mad!" retorted Dreypa. "I have no desire to raise a monolith and drain Korriban to become a god. The Dark Path *can* lead us to victory over the Republic."

"So you've continued to practice it?" XoXaan said with distaste.

"When I joined with Ku'ar Danar, it wasn't out of love for him but for the power he taught us, but even if you fear to use this power, we are strong enough *now* to devastate the Republic. Sorzus, surely *you* see the wisdom in what I'm proposing. Let us strike while the fire yet flows in our veins, while we yet have fresh armies to spend in conquest."

"I do agree that this is a course worth pursuing," she replied.

"Aye, it is at that," added Hord.

"I don't agree with the Baron on most things," said Karness Muur to the surprise of many, "but it is not the worst idea he ever came up with."

"I'm onboard too," declared Broodica. "I want to see the Republic burn!"

Pall stepped forward. "I strongly suggest we think before we rush into yet another pointless and premature war with the Republic. Have you already forgotten how vast their forces are? How we were decimated despite having numerous warlords and trained members of the Black Legions and Dark Path at our command?"

"That's because we were fighting each other," groused Rel, adjusting his tunic.

Several voiced their agreement until Hord spat, "The Traitor of Alderaan is right! Now we are united." Rel didn't care for the title, but it was better than Dreypa's sobriquet for him: "the Despised One."

"And we have the Star Forge," added Ortan Cela.

"Even with the Star Forge," Pall continued, "it would take many years to begin to equal their fleet. And so monstrous a thing cannot be used without visiting harm upon ourselves, as the Rakata learned the hard way. It takes as much as it gives."

Baron Dreypa made a dismissive sound. "I do not require your *permission*, Ajunta Pall. You may be king of these Sith primitives, but you are not *my* king, though you like to fashion yourself as such! Stay then if you wish! I will go with whoever will join me. We will take the fleet and do what you will not—and we *will* see victory, for that is the way of the true Sith!"

"He means to divide and weaken us!" D'chira Onterr snarled. "With the fleet at his disposal, he could come back at any time and turn it on *us!*"

"Dreypa cannot be trusted!" Mote Onterr joined in.

"He thinks us fools that we would hand him our fleet!" Bo Vanda charged. "Vainglory and ambition! Send him away if that is what he craves, but not with *our* ships!"

Syn smiled inwardly as the debate grew heated, careful to keep her emotions in check, for XoXaan was always watching her. But not even XoXaan suspected that Syn had already convinced several to go along with Dreypa's plan, which wasn't his plan after all but her's, and she'd planted the seed in him subtly, as men like him only thought themselves clever. But to convince the rest had required *persuasion*.

To Karness Muur, in exchange for working with Dreypa and backing the war against the Republic, she gave the first of the Great Amulets. With it he could create a monstrous army out of the living. She had to promise another one to Dreypa when he found out, no doubt because Muur rubbed it in his face. He wanted one that would give him control of the Leviathans. She complied but not without some adjustments: her own power superseded his, and the more he used it, the more it would drain him.

She kept the third of the Great Amulets for herself, of course. Syn already had a gift for summoning, but with this she became a Master Summoner able to call forth an array of entities to fight on her behalf. As the battles within the Caldera had reached their culmination, the Leviathans and other creatures were growing restless and would not long sit idly by. They'd been bred for war and destruction, and she was not sure anyone could control them if they were not sated.

Tulak Hord's motives were purer. He loved conquest, and the idea of ruling the Republic was too great a temptation if he thought it could be done.

For Cela, it was his obsession with the secret of eternal life which the Old Sith seemed to have attained and which Syn had promised to help him find.

For Broodica, it was pure as well but in a different way. She loved Syn. The two had forged a romantic bond which they kept hidden for fear that the others would see it as a power play. What Broodica didn't know was that Syn kept secrets even from her.

Syn kept her motivations strictly guarded. To others it appeared that she chafed under the heel of Ajunta Pall. Strong in the Force though he was, his heart was divided, and while he went to great pains to hide it, he longed for his lost and stolen youth. But Pall was merely the pretense. She had never ceased following Dreadwar's teachings.

That left Ajunta Pall, XoXaan, the Onterr brothers, Bo Vanda, and Rel against the idea. Half of the *Jen'jidai*. The civil war that erupted seemed almost inevitable, but when it resulted in the destruction of their fortress-city, Syn called for a truce, appealing to Pall's better nature. Her solution, which wouldn't please Dreypa (though his desires were the least of her concerns) was to take half of the fleet and leave the other half to Pall. Further, she proposed that they forge a pact, ensuring allegiance to one another and to King Pall, to whom they would again serve as Shadow Hands.

And in blood did each one sign the pact.

THE QALYDON RECKONING

Rel was tasked to analyze the star charts obtained from Dreadwar and reprogram the nav computer that had borne them across the Stygian Caldera. The six Sith Lords and their fleets and armies of Massassi followed it out. Under Sorzus Syn's leadership, Karness Muur, Tulak Hord, Ortan Cela, Broodica, and Remulus Dreypa—leading as the vanguard—set off to begin their conquest of Republic space.

For Rel, this was his opportunity to depart in secret, to get far from those whose company he'd come to find intolerable. He was never seen again by the Exiles.

The crusade that followed became known as the Qalydon Reckoning, for it was at Qalydon that they discovered the rubicund Kaiburr crystals that would, along with the rediscovery of power-cell technology, prove key in the construction of superior lightsabers, bringing an end to their impractical and unwieldy battery packs.

Hord and Cela went to Urkupp on a mission. This was the world of the Dashade who had fought on the side of the Old Ones in the Cosmic Wars. They had since remained on their world, licking their wounds. But Hord wasn't interested in the fractious nation, only two of them. As he'd expected, he and Cela were challenged by Urkupp's greatest warriors, the Shadow Killers, Khem Val and Veshikk Urk. Hord consented to the challenge on the condition that if he won, the challengers would vow eternal service to him. The Shadow Killers agreed. It would be no easy victory.

Hord knew the Dashade were resistant to the Force, and he received many blows that would have killed a lesser man. But the battle proved to be the most gratifying he'd ever fought. Cela came out of it just as hurt and just as victorious. His master had trained him well, and this had been his final test. Ortan Cela would thereafter be known as Darth Andeddu. Bloodied and bruised, Khem Val and Veshikk Urk bowed before their new masters, swearing to attend them the rest of their days.

Hord then led his servants and fellow Dark Lords across Yn, Chabosh, Aduba-6, and Balmorra, where they later boasted of having killed over a thousand Jedi.[219]

After these early battles, Hord taught the Sith Lords and Dashade Shadow Killers the secret of *derriph midwan*. Syn established a Sith Academy on Sigil as did Broodica on Malachor III, with the two having parted ways after acknowledging the volatile nature of their relationship. Paraphrasing the sestet that had been Danar's satire of the Jedi Code, Syn embedded the new Sith Code that would pass down the millennia in various Sith texts and holocrons.[220]

Baron Dreypa had earlier recruited many to his cause, though his means and methods were quite different than Syn's, utilizing fear and violence as his primary motivation. Dreypa was now the commander of many soldiers, Massassi, and two dreaded Leviathans, which he controlled by means of the talisman Syn had given

[219] This kind of exaggeration is par for the course for conquerers. Wars are unpredictable. Hyperbolic propaganda can cow future enemies into capitulation, thereby reducing the numbers of forces and resources that would otherwise be sacrificed in a long and drawn out conflict.

[220] Before morphing into the form Sorzus Syn recorded, the original, unwritten Sith'ari prophecy parodied the Chosen One prophecy: "The galaxy shall know the glory of the Sith, For a new Sith'ari shall come to lead them; He will attain the fullness of power, Until the Sith are no more, for he is their seal."

him. After taking them out of the Stygian Caldera, he departed from the larger fleet with his personal battle group to survey Alderaan as a potential throneworld for him.

And there he was discovered by a large flotilla of Jedi warships. Frustrated by the immediate setback, Dreypa fled, thinking it prudent not to lead them back to the main armada. Instead, he led them across the expanse in a vain attempt to shake them. Battle after battle they fought until Dreypa was shot down over Kesh, where his armies were forced to make a last stand. Dreypa rained fire and blood upon Kesh, unleashing Force Storms, an arsenal of weapons, and the Leviathans against the Jedi.

But these were Jedi Masters, veterans of the Battle of Corbos. Their own powers rivalled that of the greatest Sith. And though the world burned in the flames of Dreypa's rage, they saw to the protection of the Keshiri while pressing their attack on the ever-weakening Sith Lord. Furious at his predicament and thinking how foolish he would look if Karness Muur ever discovered it, Dreypa commanded his forces to destroy the ships the Jedi had come down on. *Now the Jedi will be stranded!*

But Dreypa hadn't considered the planet's natural magnetic fields, which prevented them calling for aid; and his command ended up marooning the Baron's forces as well, leading to dissension among the ranks. Those who'd been conscripted into Dreypa's army had never been particularly fond of the self-serving baron, and what was being done to this paradisiac world seemed wasteful and wrong. This latest act was the tipping point. For now, they kept silent while a few who had discovered the one ship that survived the bombing hid it away where only they could retrieve it.

Then, as if a switch had gone off, the Leviathans abandoned Dreypa for the mountains of Keshta near the Sessal Spire, Kesh's dormant volcano, and all his attempts to retrieve them left him feeling depleted. He knew then that Syn had deceived him.

But Dreypa had not gotten this far without being clever. First, he placed the larvae of Leviathans he'd stolen from Syn's lab in the lava pit of the Sessal Spire where they would grow and serve him at a future time. Then he altered the Great Amulet to increase his strength rather than exhaust it, which he did by stealing the life-force of his prisoners, and when their numbers ran out, from his own men who'd failed him.

This was the last straw. Seeing in Dreypa an echo of Darth Dreadwar and bitterly ruing the destruction they'd brought to Kesh and its people, his servants tainted his goblet of wine with a potent herb that a Keshiri slave informed them of. Then, en masse, the Dark Lord's servants abandoned him and came to the camp of the Jedi.

Using the Force to discern the sincerity of the dissidents, the Jedi welcomed the former Sith into their fold, and from them learned of the Oubliette, one of two containment units that Dreypa had constructed to trap and contain his adversaries. Now as one they convened against the Baron, who'd survived the attempted poisoning. Following the defeat of his Massassi forces, they hunted and caught the fleeing Sith Lord.

Finding himself surrounded, he wrapped himself in a Force Barrier. Though it saved his life, it could not prevent his adversaries sealing him within his very own Oubliette.

Their mission accomplished, the Jedi and their new allies bid farewell to the natives and retreated to the planet's southern polar region, where they built the city of Eshkrene. Later, they formed a noble conclave of Force-users known as the Doomed. Determined to atone for their sins, they dedicated themselves to protecting the Keshiri and the Oubliette. Altering the Jedi and Sith Code, the Code of the Doomed read:

War is a lie
There is no defeat
There is serenity
Through power I am enslaved
Through the Force I am doomed

Dreypa's fellow Sith Lords were content to move on without him; Karness Muur beamed upon discovering his rival's fate, for he had been the one who first planted in the Baron's mind the idea of Alderaan, having earlier spoken of "the great prestige" that would go to anyone who took it, all the while knowing it was well protected by the Republic and that the obstreperous egomaniac would take the bait.

Sorzus Syn's Academy on Sigil had, meanwhile, achieved its goal of training and indoctrinating new conscripts who showed an aptitude for the Force. Sigil's populace had not exactly been eager to join with their conquerors, but the Sith did not have the same evil reputation at this time as they'd had earlier and would later again. And Syn had learned a thing or two from the example Volshe had set on Ambria. The citizens were given a boost in their standard of living, and so long as they didn't rebel against their masters, they saw gains in their wealth, environment, education, and leisure time. Those who resisted, on the other hand, faced harsh reprisals.

So the Academy ranks filled up. Amongst the notable names that came out of these were Vaius Antinus, Barel-Slathborn, Ergast, Garatak, Neer, Pharshol, Ronin, Baka Sadow, Vacuus Tyrans, Vassago, who apprenticed to Karness Muur, and Aloysius Kallig, who requested to serve the great Tulak Hord.

There was something about the wealthy pup that Hord disliked, but Kallig would not take no for an answer and challenged Hord's general to a friendly contest, which he won. Knowing that he would look weak if he declined him now, Hord accepted Kallig as his apprentice and later, as they went on to many triumphs, made him his new general. But Hord privately grudged him the position.

Broodica—whose own Academy on Malachor III was dedicated to the archaeological, historical, and linguistic work of recovering, translating, and studying esoteric Sith lore from ages past—did not hold to Syn's secret research and sent her the young and exuberant Terrak Morrhage, who Syn took on as her apprentice when he showed no qualms about the genocide she was planning. Together, they worked from her personal laboratory, alchemically developing various biological plagues for future deployment against the Republic. It was during his apprenticeship that Terrak Morrhage fell in love with her, but Syn was not interested in romantic entanglements, for she'd begun having visions of the Jedi and her impending death.

With a feeling of dread, she departed Sigil for Malachor III and Broodica, who took her in. But even there the Jedi tracked her, informed as they were by a student who'd overheard her making arrangements. After a savage skirmish, they imprisoned Syn, but it was only when they discovered her laboratory on Sigil—*proof of the heinous things she was planning to unleash*—that they razed the research center and had Syn executed as a threat to the Republic. So did she pay for her allegiance to the Dark Path.

Grief-stricken and enraged, Terrak Morrhage became obsessed with continuing his mistress' work and dedicated his time to studying maxichlorians, summoning rituals,

and the secrets of the black orchid. Years hence, he developed and unleashed a plague that could cloud the minds of Jedi and turn them into mindless thralls. Alarmed by this latest threat, a Jedi Healer named Catrine Omero developed a means of breaking the mental domination. Although its successful application came at the cost of her own life, her sacrifice had not been in vain, as other Jedi picked up where she left off, stripping away the source of power fueling Morrhage who was then caught and executed.[221]

The Sith Empire, meanwhile, replenished their depleted Massassi forces with slave armies supplied by the vicious organization known as Crucible, which was founded by Lord Ieldis, a darksider who had gone underground at the end of the Hundred-Year Darkness when it became clear that the Republic was going to win.

Yet for all the victories the Qalydon Sith were able to boast of, they were but a few drops in a great ocean. As Ajunta Pall and XoXaan had predicted, the massive tide of the Republic had turned against them. Seeing the writing on the wall and ever a pragmatist, Hord placed Khem Val in a stasis field within the Korribani tomb built for Dreadwar but used for Empress Volshe, where even the most powerful Sith Lords could not enter and where his servant would be preserved until he needed him again. Then he ordered a general retreat.

From a trickle to a torrent, the battered ships of the Dark Jedi—finned *Epyon*-class war galleys, *Apollyon*-class frigates, *Triremis*-class corvettes that served as cathedral ships, and the boxy *Dreypa*-class carriers from which flew the battle drakes and hydras like starfighters—began to slink back once again to the Outer Rim.

Karness Muur wouldn't hear of it. "The rest of you may go back if that is your desire. I will not abandon all that I have accomplished and am about to accomplish to return to the Caldera like a Ranat with a tucked tail!" With the aid of the Great Amulet, which he now called the Muur Talisman, he developed the Codex of Karness Muur to aid his posterity in understanding its power, for he now suspected that Syn had not created them, but rather unearthed the periapts from the ancient past and amplified them. With his Muur Talisman, he'd become Lord of the Rakghouls and was enjoying his success alongside his apprentice, Tyrans Vassago, who had ferreted out all of Dreypa's loyalists who had intended to trap Muur on Taris. No one now dared defy them, and he ruled Taris as Emperor.

But Hord would not allow the Sith Empire to once again scatter into individual fiefdoms or, worse, be shattered entirely by the Republic. "We are already down three of the original Dark Lords. If our empire is to survive, we need to regroup with the remaining *Jen'jidai*—and we need *all* of the masters together!"

But drunk with power and accustomed to being obeyed, Muur chafed, "Tulak Hord, Master of the Gathering Darkness you are called, but master of *me* you are not! Take your *pets* and go! I will deal with those who threaten the Sith!"

"Long years have we known each other, Karness Muur," Hord replied haughtily, "since we were fellow Jedi instructors on Ossus, but not until today did I understand

[221] His black spirit would return to cause problems for a later generation. It had been theorized by Sorzus Syn that Mnggal-Mnggal acted as a kind of maxichlorian virus, which later Sith would confirm.

Dreypa's disdain for you! You think yourself superior to all others and that because you have conquered a world of the Republic you no longer need your Sith brethren."

"That is correct, *Swordsmaster*! I no longer need or want you!"

His patience pushed to the breaking point, Hord roared, "If you will not obey, you will suffer the consequences!"

The Lord of the Rakghouls laughed. "You do not frighten *me!* You are a lesser man than once you were. Eventually, Kallig will see that and supplant you—*yes*, you fear that! That is why you did not wish to train him at first…"

Red with rage, Hord struck out at Muur. Although, he put up a formidable defense, he could not withstand the Wroonian's pummeling blade striking again and again until his body fell in pieces to the ground. The maddened spirit of Karness Muur entered his Talisman, having earlier encoded it with potent incantations to ensure his survival.

The Talisman would remain on Taris a long time, and ever the Rakghoul Plague would erupt from it, but it could not affect one who was Force-sensitive, for which reason Muur's spirit would struggle with any Force-sensitive wielder who dared to wield it. If that one was strong in the Light, Muur might very well be destroyed; yet if the wielder was weak or corrupt, Muur would take their body for his own. Many Sith Lords of the future would seek out the Muur Talisman for its great powers, but none would succeed with it until Jedi Master Celeste Morne came to retrieve it. Against her, Muur's dark spirit strived, but a young Padawan by the name of Zayne Carrick found a way to save Celeste and locked both her and Karness in the very Oubliette Dreypa had intended to trap Muur in long ago.

Muur's apprentice, Darth Vassago, fearing he might suffer a similar fate at Hord's hands, fled to his homeworld of Vjun. When he was not pursued, he asserted himself as ruler, establishing the lineage of Sith Lords that would one day become the Mecrosa Order of Sith Knights. Out of this line came the Three Sisters—Cairon, Jirell, and High Lady Brezwalt III—who obsessed over acquiring forbidden tomes, and eventually secured the arcane *Black Book* and a lost copy of the dangerous *De Vermis Mysteriis*, with which they sought out the means to defy death… and if haunting their ship as merciless, living-dead mummies could be considered *defiance*, perhaps they did.

Now, as Count Tyrans Vassago, he went on to become a cruel old nobleman. Having learned from his former master the rare arts of Dark Side healing and the foul alchemy of Rakghoul transformation, he twisted and shaped his own horrors into the ravenous Energy Vampires whose feculent bites turn victims into mindless ghouls.[222]

By a similar means did he preserve his own wicked life for centuries. While peasants toiled in the acid-soaked fields below, he erected the alcazar of Château Bast from which House Vassago ruled Vjun for millennia.[223]

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[222] Energy Vampires would later be hunted down by the Jedi Order, with Master Samuro containing what was believed to be the last of them on Mandragora.

[223] Originally named Chateau Vassago until being acquired and restored by House Bast who gifted it to Vader, it would serve as inspiration for other dread forts.

THE LURE OF BLACK BOXES

Though he is regarded as a great Sith king by later generations, in his palace on Ziost, Ajunta Pall was lonely and regretful. In the final years of his reign, Pall had begun to decry the pointless ruin of the Dark Side and looked upon his comrades and subjects as foolish, greedy, prideful, ambitious, ill-tempered children unable to cooperate with anyone who posited a different view or approach. And the life he might have had haunted him along with the faces of all those whose lives he'd taken.

So it was that he permitted four Sith Lords to go forth to the prison-world of Belsavis to retrieve the Wraith Box. This was a legendary item of ancient Rakatan construction that stories claimed held captured Wraiths. D'chira believed that if they could free the trapped entities, they would bestow unto them untold power; Mote believed it was a great weapon that could be used against their adversaries; Bo Vanda thought it would bring their empire riches beyond count. Only XoXaan held reservations, for she recalled from the histories that some being of terrible power had imprisoned the Destroyer of Worlds along with thousands of Esh-kha and the Infernal Council in Belsavis. Still, if the box did bestow power or wealth, she would have it. Her trust in the others had diminished over the years, and she knew Ajunta Pall had become indecisive and weak, infected by the flicker of light he yet carried in him.

What the Wraith Box brought them was madness and death. The Onterr brothers were driven to rage and slew one another. XoXaan burst into purple flames and vanished, though whether to death or elsewhere, no one knew. Only Bo Vanda returned to tell the tale, as later chronicled by Lord Skaysh, and resume work on her holocron and experiments. Whatever thoughts or anxieties she had, she kept to herself.

Pall would not miss his former allies and was glad of the peace it afforded him, knowing he had little time left. But he found no peace, for his thoughts were steeped in grief and resentment at having come too late to learn the lesson: the Dark Side only provided power in exchange for more valuable assets, distorting the mind, heart, and spirit by amplifying fears and desires, magnifying weakness of character, and quelling strengths. And so it was that the one who recreated the Sith Empire, who was seen as the manifestation of Typhojem and the first Dark Lord of the Sith, died attempting to overcome the darkness within. At his death, Pall's body was taken to Korriban and placed in a massive onyx tomb in what became the Valley of the Dark Lords. His rueful spirit could find no peace either, lingering there in agony until the arrival of the Jedi Knight Revan, who helped restore Pall to the light and that which lay beyond.

When Tulak Hord and the other Dark Lords at last returned, Bo Vanda welcomed them as conquering heroes and all but handed Hord the empire Ajunta Pall's death left behind. He then appointed Bo Vanda as Darth Simi and Broodica as Darth Judicar. He himself would be regarded as Darth Karnage.

After learning of the tragedy of the Wraith Box, Karnage and Andeddu joined forces to craft five artifacts that together would enact a powerful form of the *itsu-ashmûd* ritual and give them the greater vitality needed to further expand their

domain, which the Sith Empire eventually did by over a hundred worlds, including the Dromund system where the Sith first originated.

Yet, just as Hord began a new reign of conquest for the Sith, two things happened in succession that would hasten the end of his life.

Hord had not earned the title Lord of Hate by merely defeating his opponents in battle, but from the intensity of hatred he felt for any he suspected of plotting against him. Unlike Andeddu, whom Hord had known for over a century since he was a sullen boy in his class, General Kallig was seen as unpredictable, ambitious, and capable of smiling sunnily while sticking a vibro-shiv in the back. In the years since training him, Hord had come to feel an intense antipathy towards him. This was now exacerbated with the discovery that Kallig had ordered the theft of one of the artifacts he'd created. Karnage pronounced him a traitor and swore *kaggath*, which lasted fifteen-years and saw Kallig's family fleeing to find sanctuary.[224]

But Kallig had *not* stolen the artifact and felt betrayed by his former master. In retribution, he then stole one of the other artifacts, which he hid on Dromund Kaas. But this cost him his life, as he was spotted by one of Hord's subjects and reported. Darth Karnage, the Lord of Hate, came himself to finish off his former general. But in the midst of a wearying battle against Kallig, Darth Andeddu's Dashade Shadow Killer appeared from the shadows to stab his master's former mentor in the back and consume the dying Sith Lord's essence to prevent his spirit from transferring.[225]

As the others soon discovered, it was Andeddu who had stolen the artifact. He'd earlier been delving into Muur's studies of the holocryptic enigmas of immortality when Hord rashly killed him. Furious but forced to forge ahead in secret, Andeddu followed the trail of the Dark Path to its source, not Dreadwar who perverted it to his own ends, but the deathless Ankath and the lost technique of *ukûbokum* found in the Trayus Academy. He then made his way to the Great Library of Veeshas Tuwan in Arkania. By the time he returned, paranoia had taken hold, and he became convinced that the others were jealous of his growing knowledge and intent on harming him, reasoning that the real motive his former master had had for slaying Muur was envy of his growing powers. And if Hord could turn on one former apprentice, he would have no compunction against turning on the other.

Broodica was the first to surmise that Andeddu was planning something akin to the detestable *rakhkfrûm* ritual that Dreadwar had intended. The Dark Lords would not allow themselves to be used as sacrificial victims for Andeddu's dreams of apotheosis, and they confronted him while he was yet in the midst of performing a spell. Denouncing him, they proclaimed his execution at their hands. As he was actually involved in a wholly different incantation, this confirmed their treachery in his

[224] *Kaggath* means "contest between siblings" and descended from the ancient Sith fairy tale, *Sur Kaggat*, describing a great battle between avatars of two Old Ones. Kaggath came to refer to any battle between rival Sith Lords and survives in the modern Sith era as *Charge Matrica*.

[225] Hord's weakened spirit just managed to escape, manifesting again on Yavin 4 after the pieces of his artifact, scattered by Andeddu and his allies, were regathered by Darth Nox.

mind. Rapidly changing gears, he instead cast *dwomutsiqsa*, which kept his former companions busy while he fled for his private keep on Prakith, leaving his throne in the Great Temple's Hall of the Undying forever empty. Then, to throw his pursuers off his scent, he hid the remaining artifacts of Hord on different worlds. He didn't need them anyway, having already learned from the recherche lore a technique of *itsu-ashmûd* that required no external devices.

After studying the few missals Andeddu had left in his haste to depart, Darth Simi gathered the Dark Lords: "I well know that many of you in whispers scorned me for not taking the throne after Pall's death, instead handing it to Hord on a platter, but far greater work did I have than mere suzerainty. And now it has paid off! Though I only partly understand his methodology, Darth Andeddu's goals of immortality were sound. It was not *rakhkfrûm* that he'd uncovered but *ukûbokum* and something else he had begun to employ. Within this volumen are the missing pieces. With my own studies, they will allow us to attain our dream of immortality without having to prey on one another or even our loyal subjects. Follow me now into the unlighted halls beneath the Valley of the Dark Lords and see if we might wrest the secrets of eternal life!"

This speech was met with secret glee, and Darth Judicar and eleven others descended into the depths. This group included those who had more recently been elevated to the rank of. Once below, Darth Simi proceeded with her admixture of abstruse legerdemain and recondite science. The ghastly and harrowing process of lichdom was no painless one, but it was the only way to make them as the Ankath of old and heirs to the Shadow.

And, oh, how they hated her for it!

But hate was the Way of the Dark, as she'd come to realize. In due course, they grew accustomed to their hideous ruination as exanimate shapes of decay and horror. Over the course of millennia, they conspired in darkness with the Lich Kings of the Nihil Retreat by means of the Oracle Stones, those primordial spheres of precognition and clairvoyance that the Ancient Ones had gifted their forebears, enabling them to remain appraised of events in the galaxy as they orchestrated movement in the political sphere, corrupting Exar Kun, counselling the Reborn Palpatine, and perpetually preparing for the impending day of release when all the galaxy would be cast in nocturnal shroud.

As to the Throne of the Living Sith, Bo Vanda had left behind instructions for it to pass to the rule of a single Dark Lord of the Sith, and this was to be Lord Ieldis of the Crucible, he for whom the underworld and the glories to come held little interest when compared to the glories of this world. For the two realms, that of the living and that of the undead, were necessary for the advancement of their ultimate goal.

Of the more than one hundred and twenty planets of the Stygian Caldera, Sith sovereignty would last nearly two more millennia before collapsing at the end of the Great Hyperspace War.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-SEVEN

NAGA SADOW MEETS THE MATERIALIST MAGICIAN

THE DISSEMBLING DISCIPLE

The successors of the Exiles were dangerous and evil, but they were not True Sith, for the Immortal Gods were but old stories to them to be exploited as necessary. Many would lay claim to the title, but those who held that mantle were as mythic as the gods, or so Darth Dreadwar had led them to believe. And ever and anon, the Shadow Council watched, only intervening as the Dark decreed.

For nearly two thousand years the spirit of Darth Dreadwar hungered in the howling winds of Nilrebmah XIII, gnawing on the stone of his aetheric prison in impotent rage. All the power of a dead planet was not enough for him to manifest beyond the carapace of the blasted sable sands that had grown to form a secondary crust over the original surface of the dim, dust-laden world. And the mewling corpses of his army, most now only skeletons in armor, crawled up and down the eight thousand steps of his dread citadel in maddening patrol until he had them stored in carbonite.

In the event he did not succeed in mastering his goal of immortality, the macabre secrets of his book, *Jiaas'kintikon*, had been interred not with Dreadwar but in a tomb his Korriban vassals had long before prepared for him in the Valley of the Dark Lords. In this vault, built around a Rakatan Star Map left by Darth Soa on Korriban, guarded by columns of crumbling carbonite statues, the pages of the book rotted in the grasp of Kára Volshe's hands, for the skeletal remains of Dreadwar's former queen had been placed beside the tomb meant for him.

In 5155 BBY, a young half-blood of the Kissai caste, completing his final trial as an acolyte, pierced the defenses surrounding the secret chamber and plundered this crypt. Ignoring the suits of rotting armour dotting the periphery and the two ancient lightsabers the effigy of the Witch-Queen grasped like wands, young Naga Sadow took from its cold grasp Dreadwar's vile grimoire.

Guided by the mesmerizing glow of the Star Map, he set out for the frigid plains of Khar Delba to practice the tome's forgotten rites within an ancient temple dedicated to a god whose inscription had long ago crumbled to sand. Amid the insane scribblings and hieroglyphs of a tongue too ancient to decipher, the ambitious Sadow found what he was looking for: a ritual to enhance his powers.

With the forlorn snows buffeting the ruined walls of the cold, grey temple, Naga Sadow drew a sigil in the dirt and danced before the flickering fire he'd lit, chanting in High Galactic and the old Balc dialect of the Sith. He wore only the Turag crystal descended to him from his forebears who'd been gifted it from Broodica who had claimed it from the throne room of the late Over-Predor on Lehon. At last, after six hours had passed, with his voice hoarse from long, mind-wrenching screams—some

not of his own making—and his vascularized legs succumbing to paralysis, his Turag crystal began to glow. While pondering the meaning of this, a smoky form rose from the whirling flame, coalescing out of the chilling aether.

Its blistering icy presence extinguished the ritual fire while the air roared with arcane energies pierced by a distant fell cry. Collapsing to his knees, Sadow looked up at the empty hood of the ancient wraith. His tendrils quivering in fear, he determined that this must be some daemon akin to those summoned by the rite of *dwomutsiqsa* that would obey his every command. "Increase my power," Sadow implored.

Spectral laughter saturated the air like fog. "Why would I do that?" the spirit hissed, looking down at the pitiably hopeful face of the acolyte kneeling before him.

"Because our empire has dwindled; our leaders lack vision; and our people tear at each other like wild shyraks."

"I will teach you, for I am Darth Dreadwar, Dark Lord of the Sith, and you have somehow freed me from my numinous prison…" Realizing he'd been wildly incorrect in his supposition and falling back on the obeisance training all Korribani were taught as younglings, Sadow prostrated himself before him. The Dark Lord approved and gazed up. "Strange are these skies. Aeons must have passed!"

"Forgive my ignorance, venerable master," Sadow started, not knowing Dreadwar's identity, for all history of the hated Dark Lord had been expunged from the records, but figuring he might yet coax secrets from the ancient spirit, "but… I don't know from whence you come. Are you a ghost sent from the afterlife to restore our glory?" Sadow had known of such things since the time he was a boy. "I have heard spectral whispers in the Valley of Golg telling me I was destined for greatness," he gestured confidently, "and the Elder Priests speak of the shades of fallen Dark Lords, for which reason the thaumaturges obey the old traditions, leave the artifacts of the Lord's favoring and bury the Lord's servants with them to assist them in the next world. I have heard too of Sith who came close to death and spoke of the terrifying black winds and fires of Chaos yawning before them."

"I am no ghost but consciousness embedded in the Force," Dreadwar rasped, attempting to correct Sadow's naive inquiries. "There is no life after death, child. Only nothingness awaits. Like much of your race, you have been raised on superstitious myths and legends. Only the material is real." Sadow was surprised to hear this coming from what was clearly a specter, and that must have shown on his face, because the ghost continued: "The science of the Dark Side cannot easily be explained to one so steeped in primitivism, but I will attempt it, for I see you have *some* power. The afterlife is that which you make for yourself using the advanced science that is feared by the weak and superstitious. By solving the problem of death and the true nature of the Force—what you oft call *magic*—I have uploaded my consciousness to the informational substrate of the Cosmos itself, transcending the useless, lumbering golem of ephemeral flesh. I persist as a conscious force unbound, a being of pure memetic information, my qualia unchanged, and I shall endure so long as this universe endures—perhaps even further still, as there is an infinitude of others through which identical consciousness might be sustained."

"I beg your forgiveness, my lord," Sadow said, rising hesitantly to his feet. "There is much in your words I do not understand."

Within the void of that empty cowl Sadow sensed an awful smile. "Gather your things," Dreadwar hissed. "I shall teach you the great secrets in exchange for your knowledge of what has transpired since my apotheosis. You shall be my apprentice, and when I am again Emperor of the Sith, I shall lead your people to rule the stars."

Continuing to dampen his emotions, Sadow feigned servility and did as Dreadwar bade. Once onboard his ship, they departed Khar Delba for Ziost, the capital of the Sith worlds. The hooded spirit immediately began his lessons, "Despite my great learning of the sciences, I too had once been fooled." Dreadwar would not sit but stood just behind him in the dominant position. *That, at least, is typical of a Dark Lord,* thought Sadow. "In the depths of Malachor V, I was contacted by one of those that are called the 'Immortal Gods of the Sith.' At the time, I was awed and accepted it at face value, believing this *deity* or some grim servant had led me to that place. Later, I was attacked by those that could only be described as Beings of Shadow, the purported ministers and messengers of the Outer Gods. They would have us believe that they are supernatural entities—gods and demons—but they are no more than advanced intelligences who learned through the evolution of intellect to transcend their mortal coils and project their will upon the world. It is by these means that they terrify and deceive the lesser races! In this, they are as guilty as the Celestial myth-inventors whose so-called 'Maker' is probably some old goat from Lesser Tana!"

Sadow had long ago learned not to speak aloud his thoughts if they disagreed with his elders. So, while he affected awe, he was thinking that Dreadwar was merely restating older concepts with words that sounded impressive. *What difference does it make the names such things are given? What matters if one calls it magic or science if it requires the same methods and means to achieve results?*

"I sustain my existence through how I attained it," Dreadwar continued, presuming that Sadow had heard of his grand life, not realizing he was imparting history that few Sith knew, "through devouring an entire world; through the eldritch geometry of Ninmah Ixgûl I erected; through the permeation of my energy into the Nihil Smokestones of Nilrebmah, I gathered and focused the Force into a concentrated nexus, anchoring my being in place with sufficient stability to escape the dissolution of identity that your people perceive as the coming Chaos!" He waved a rotting gauntlet dismissively. "You know not the reasons why you build your tombs according to exacting designs; why your holiest symbol is a pyramid; how your people fashion ley lines in the Force through the geometry of your mausoleums; nor how the slaves you inter with your rulers provide energy enough to maintain their psychic existence as their bodies rot in the grave. Without my discovery of the true scale of sacrifice required for *genuine* immortality, your rulers are cursed to a half-life, tortured imprints of their consciousness echoing through the Force—immobile like bloodstains within their tombs. Yet I, sustained by a world and freed from the Celestials' trap, may now go where I please. For that, you have my gratitude."

Sadow's face simulated astonishment and pleasure, but he thought that this *Dreadwar* could not be so powerful if he'd been dependent on a mere acolyte to free him.

THE ZEALOT OF ZIOST

When they arrived on Ziost, Dreadwar kept his word, anointing Sadow with the archaic title of Darth. It did not have much meaning to the Sith of his world, but he accepted it graciously while his new master continued instructing him on the 'greater truths of the galaxy.' Weeks and months passed in this manner. Sadow exhibited considerable patience during these lectures, going to great lengths to hide the fact that he found them tiresome and trite. It was clear the Dark Lord was as impressed with his own magnificence as he was disdainful of everyone else and their "voodoo dogmas." Yet, for all of Dreadwar's bombastic speeches and lofty terminology, Sadow remained unconvinced. As a Korribani Sith, he'd grown up in a culture of pragmatism. The Sith believed there was something beyond the natural world that they could attain to, and they knew from ancient texts some of the stories of gods and demons striving amongst men. But they were not particularly religious nor given to the *irrational beliefs* that Dreadwar scorned them of.

Of all the Dark Lords I could have raised… Still, Dreadwar had not come this far without having some knowledge and power. Sadow simply had to sift through the weeds to pluck out the rare bits of wheat while continuing to act amazed and grateful for his master's *great wisdom*.

Finally, his patience paid off, and Dreadwar began teaching him of the legendary and secretive Shadow Council—though even when speaking of these he couldn't help but be dismissive! "Two paths lay before the Sith: that of power and that of submission. The lower Sith seek power, for they do not understand the deeper truth of the Dark and that *it* alone is power. But without a tight rein, it will consume all light and life in the galaxy. The highest acolytes who serve the mythical Outer Gods would have us submit to bringing about ultimate entropy, what they call the Way of the Dark. But we aught not be slaves to the dark, but its masters! The *key*, my apprentice, is to walk *both* paths but never succumb fully to either. To seek out nothing but power for its own sake is the way of the fool, as that only invites others to lust after and steal it, but to seek out nirvana for the sake of nihilism is also the way of the fool, for what good is nothingness?"

"But how can one walk both paths?" asked Sadow, wondering not for the first time if the voluble spirit had become a bit mad in his past two millennia of confinement. "They are at cross-purposes."

"So everyone believes," Dreadwar chuckled. "They are but two heads of the same serpent: *ignore one* at the peril of the other, but *dominate both*, and you will attain ultimate power!"

"Will you teach me this?" *Finally, something I can use!*

"Perhaps…" the cowled figure seemed to grow more ominous. Trust was not a possession of any Sith, and Sadow quickly lowered his head to show humility. "First, we must begin with smaller tasks… then, we will attempt some of the elder science that has been forgotten: how to use diabolical engines to form genetic aberrations, how to perform the Great Ritual, how to even give flesh to the departed!"

To this latter point, Dreadwar did something odd, constructing a body in the image of his former self that would purportedly not age or falter. Into this flesh-puppet, he imbued his malicious spirit. It was a lengthy and arduous process, mostly for Naga Sadow, who had to secure all the necessary tools and ingredients. "Perhaps you can help me understand better, master, but I thought you told me earlier that the spectral form was superior? If so, why build a physical form?" Sadow was taking a chance asking what could be considered an impertinent question. Another master might strike him dead for the mere hint of second-guessing him. Fortunately, Dreadwar was only too pleased to show off his brilliance.

"As a spirit, I would command fear in my legions, but then they will remain bonded to superstition, and I would be as culpable as those whom I despise. Not all are as willing to shed their false beliefs as you have been, for which reason I've chosen you as my apprentice." Sadow knew the real reason had been because he brought him back to the land of the living and was willing to put up with his incessant monologues. He also suspected that Dreadwar wanted a body back so he could indulge once more in the pleasures of the flesh.

RESTLESS NATIVES

Given Dreadwar's disdain for the True Sith's goals, Sadow was surprised by the extraordinary arrival of the envoys of the cryptic Shadow Council. None in his generation or several prior had ever seen their innominable brethren from the mythic Outer Reaches, and as the cabalistic anchorites shuffled past him like disinterred incubi in cerememted robes which only barely concealed their waxy façades, he shuddered. He thought Dreadwar's new corpselike body was bad, but these mouldering monstrosities were worse, and he wondered at the ghastly thoughts that must lurk in their unfathomable minds, all the while grateful they'd be keeping to their dark and haunted tower on Ziost, the ruined Citadel of the Dark Lords.

Dreadwar would not speak of their discourse, save to say this: "If you think I am inscrutable, be grateful you do not have to deal with *them*!"

Over the next several weeks, he made several secret trips. When he returned, it was with a robot fleet that obeyed his every command. "Fashioned years before by the ancient Star Forge!" he gloated from across the hangar. With it, his conquest of the Sith peoples came swiftly, for there were none who could withstand such a force, and once again the Stygian Caldera was dominated by Darth Dreadwar the Magnus, who reclaimed the mantle from what he termed the "dynasties of savage hybrids," restoring the Humanocentric rule he'd long ago inaugurated.

But he would not go unchallenged. Sadow had been adept at stroking his ego while hiding the fact that his people were only grudgingly going along with his master until they could find a way to unseat him. And now that Dreadwar had let down his guard, they were ready. Hybrid Kissai priests gathered in secret under the leadership of their most powerful general Marka Ragnos and his cunning sorcerer Naucratis Simus, and had rallied the Massassi to their cause.

Just as Dreadwar was engaged in a ritual that would restore flesh to the spirit of a long-dead Empress, they mounted a revolt of natural-born Sith against the Dark Lord.

Dreadwar was more than adept in battle, as they learned the hard way, but they had their own surprises for him. At this time, Naucratis Simus approached Naga Sadow to see where he stood. Sadow knew the old sorcerer only by reputation and had admired him for being practical, wise, and speaking only when necessary. "Tell me what you know of this *Darth* Dreadwar."

Without hesitation, Sadow told him all that had transpired.

"What you have told me is useful," Simus replied after pondering the matter. "You acted with great discernment. A lesser acolyte would have either blindly followed or gotten himself killed. I have not taken on an apprentice for some years, but I will complete your training." Sadow knew what an honor it was to be taught by him, and as pureblood rebels surged from Korriban to attack Dreadwar's new palace on Ziost, Sadow knelt before his new master, relieved to be rid of the garrulous former one.

Naga Sadow's training went well, and the intel he'd given proved helpful in the war against Dreadwar—so much so that Sadow was advanced to the highest ranks of the Sith. Sadow raised up his own squad of assassins called the *Sadow'een*. He also cast off the 'Darth' sobriquet, though he maintained whatever valuable lessons he'd learned, from which Sadow would later produce many perverted penumbrations.

Enraged at the betrayal, Darth Dreadwar vowed to destroy his former apprentice, but that would prove difficult as the *Sadow'een* had proven extremely effective. Dreadwar's forces finally downed them on the remote jungle moon of Yavin 4, far beyond the borders of the Sith Empire where they would be trapped for a time. In the meantime, Dreadwar took to ensuring that his mistake with Sadow would not repeat again. So that his ideology would carry on in the event that something happened to him, he constructed two amulets into which he poured a measure of his own will and strength. They would activate upon the presence of two powerful Humans who embraced the dark ideology of the Sith.

Years of war passed with Marka Ragnos and Naucratis Simus fighting on until, at last, Simus discovered the means to counter the spell that freed Dreadwar's spirit from Nilrebmah XIII. At a most inconvenient time—just as he was dueling Marka Ragnos—Darth Dreadwar's body began to stiffen and fail, and with a fierce grin, Ragnos began dismembering the Dark Lord! In 5150 BBY, the spirit of Ku'ar Danar was forced out of his broken vessel and back to sleep on Nilrebmah XIII.

ETERNAL LOATHING

Allotting Dreadwar the interment of worthy foes, Ragnos had the pieces of his body buried within the Great Temple on Korriban. Danar's twin amulets were given to Naga Sadow. He had misgivings about the objects and what they did, but he would not have the opportunity to investigate. His relief at the death of his former master turned to disgust when instead of celebrating their victory, Ragnos turned against Simus, contesting him for the right to succeed Dreadwar as ruling Dark Lord. Simus

could not envision Ragnos as a great leader and told him so in no uncertain terms, though the point was made moot when Ragnos lopped off his head!

But having earlier unearthed the arcane arts of Darth Andeddu encrypted in his holocron, the spirit of Simus endured, tethering itself to his disembodied head.[226]

When his remains were placed inside his tomb in the Great Temple, Ragnos discovered what Simus had done and pressed him for the secret. The sorcerer's spirit laughed and would not tell him of *ukûbokum* or *itsu-ashmûd*. So, to better induce him, Ragnos appointed the head of Simus to sit on his new Supreme Council! A less tedious fate than an eternity spent staring at the walls of his tomb, Simus conceded, stipulating that Naga Sadow be recalled from exile to join them.

At the first gathering of the Supreme Council, before the shocked members who were still adjusting to Simus' severed, talking head, Ragnos announced the renewed eminence of the Sith species. The Sith would again be masters of their own destiny. Sadow held back from retorting or rolling his eyes, as this was little more than a transparent ploy to appease a certain xenophobic faction who thought themselves superior to Sith of other races or so-called half-breeds like him.

Ragnos ruled the Sith within the Stygian Caldera for a century until his death, but Simus never did share his secret with him, nor did he even reveal that he was in possession of Andeddu's holocron. In this way was the holocron passed down by bloodline and through various royal houses until it was carefully retrieved by Lady Deianeira Greejatus from the secret Sith Archives of Palpatine after his death.

Following the death of Marka Ragnos, Naga Sadow and Ludo Kressh fought for the right to sovereignty. Their contest was delayed by the intervention of the spirit of Ragnos and the successful machinations of Sadow in securing the allegiance of over eighty worlds of the Caldera behind his claim. But even Sadow knew it was not enough to sit as king over a decaying kingdom. Although the history books claim he started a war of conquest that he could not win, in fact, his actions were founded on his desire to forestall the degradation of an empire that he loved and feared would soon fracture. In this, it was said he had the tacit support of the Shadow Council. His efforts, though unpopular with the other royals, actuated the next era for the Sith.

HARBINGER OF HATE

Naga Sadow would find himself thwarted by Ludo Kressh, who led a staunch resistance movement against Sadow's expansionist ideals—the keys to which had just come knocking at his door. After stumbling upon a trail that led them to Korriban, Tetan Hyperspace explorers, Gav Daragon and his sister Jori were promptly imprisoned on Ziost and sentenced to death. Feigning kindness, Sadow broke them out and took them to his secret fortress on Khar Shian.

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[226] The Jedi, K'Kruhk, would use this same technique to remain alive when General Grievous killed him during the Clone Wars.

Sensing considerable power in the young man, Sadow saw the potential for an apprentice disconnected from the quagmire of Sith politics, and began grooming Gav for the role. But as his intent was to expand the Sith Empire, and this meant striking at the heart of the Republic, he dissembled and manipulated the young siblings. When Kressh assaulted his fortress, Sadow helped Jori to her ship. The grateful young women flew back the Republic, unaware that he'd placed a tracking device onboard.

After devastating Kressh's forces with a hidden fleet that emerged from the other side of Khar Shian, Sadow launched an assault on the Republic from his Sith Meditation Sphere. A master of *falgul*, Sadow brought forth elaborate illusions to make his fleet appear larger than it was, and with his apprentice in his own flagship, they stormed the Teta system and Coruscant.

But just as Sadow drew close to victory, Gav Daragon had a change of heart and attacked his master's Meditation Sphere. This act of heroism would result in Daragon's death when Sadow returned fire, but it forced the Sith Lord to return to Korriban where the yet-living Ludo Kressh and his army awaited him. Though Sadow would finally see Kresh defeated, the Republic had followed him to Korriban.

At this time, two of Sadow's dreadnaughts were lost; the *Omen* had crashed on remote Kesh, marooning the crew, who beneath the hidden and vigilant eyes of the Doomed made a home there and became the Lost Tribe of the Sith. The *Harbinger* had an even stranger fate, with its sabotaged hyperdrive crossing into a volatile Hyperspace tunnel that flash-froze them for five millennia upon which time they awoke.

Faking the destruction of his flagship, the *Corsair*, Sadow went to hide on Yavin 4. His dutiful Massassi were put to work constructing new temples for him, a task which he rewarded with a thaumaturgical-alchemical process which mutated most of them into hulking monsters. It was in this period that he had a vision of the future.

Of the things he saw was the true purpose of Danar's amulets to install a Human line of Sith Lords. To ensure that this did not come to pass, Sadow attempted to destroy them in the Temple of Fire. When this failed, he sent one amulet to Ashas Ree to be kept guarded by Lord Garu. Hen gave the other to the keeping of his greatest Massassi, who served as High Priest.

As added protection for his ship and laboratory, which the temple was built over, Sadow engineered a Sith Wyrm from an infant Exogorth that would hunt down anyone who rose in opposition to his plans. Satisfied he'd taken the necessary precautions, he put himself in suspended animation, as per his vision, to await the time when a bold acolyte would awaken him to take the mantle of apprentice.

That one would arrive six centuries later in the form of Freedon Nadd.

THE HAUNTED PLANET OF ATHISS

In the wake of the Great Hyperspace War, Sith Lords scattered beyond besieged worlds in what is today known as the Sith Diaspora, with factions dispersing to Ambria, Arkania, Athiss, Vjun, Tascollan, Thule, Tund, Kesh, Dromund Kaas, and even the Unknown Regions where some found and joined forces from earlier eras. From these

disseminated groups, various would-be kings and queens declared themselves the ruling Jen'ari: Shar Dakhan, Zavakon, Vax, Lokess, Elcho Kressh, Vodal Kressh (Elcho's bastard), Tenebrae, and the Vahlan consort of Janton Belos, Valik Kodank. So was the line of a single Sith ruler broken.

One significant effort to reignite the old imperative was spearheaded by a triad of Sith warlords who settled on Athiss. Their leader was a towering Gen'Dai by the name of Xen Gaal who bore a titian-colored lightsaber. He was joined by a fallen Jedi Consular named Kla and a pureblooded Sith heretic known as Vodal Kressh. Naming themselves the Tarals ("Conservators" in the ancient tongue), they spent their lives in pursuit of a new Sith Order, and not even death could deter them, for Xen Gaal had learned the secret of *itsu-ashmûd* and took possession of their strongest and most devoted followers ere their own corpses were interred in the Bog Barrows of Ur.

Six centuries hence, as they clung to those decaying bodies with fearsome spells, becoming as wraiths, so too did they cling to their nudiustertian dreams. Darkness descended upon the wilderness and marshes of Ur, causing even the Trinthan Prowlers to flee in terror. It told the specters that the future of the Sith lay in their religion *and its adoption by corruptible Jedi*. Knowing what they had to do, the Tarals had a distress beacon set up on a crashed trade ship from the Gank-Porporite War, which they had earlier instigated through profane alchemies.

Three young Jedi Knights, amongst them the famously fearless Devaronian, Chamma, came to investigate the second planet of the Loro Babis system, following a life-sign into the Forest of Draug, a few kilometers south of the barrows in Ur. An unnatural miasma lay upon this forest, and just as the last rays of sunlight vanished, the life-sign split into three… Reluctantly, the Jedi separated to follow them.

That was when they were struck. *Waves of darkness* (*kintik duuwaj*) and *dark side web* (*odojinya)* suppressed their connection to the light, compelling them through fear and anguish to draw on the Dark Side for escape.

But the Dark Side cuts both ways. Believing the Force had deserted him to his cruel fate, Chamma tapped into his fear and anger, giving him a strength Xen Gaal had not anticipated when the Jedi fought back and buried his lightsaber into what was left of Gaal's corporeal and spiritual form. This broke the spell, allowing the Jedi to escape.

It would take a long period of self-exile on H'ratth before the stain of guilt was lifted from Chamma, and this he did with the aid of Miralukan Jedi Master, Noab Hulis. Healed, he went on to train the great Andur Sunrider, husband of the famed Nomi Sunrider.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-EIGHT

SCIONS OF AMNESIA

SECTION I: TALES OF THE SITH

The diminished vestiges of the Sith that had survived the Great Hyperspace War were beset by an unending barrage of setbacks and problems of their own making. Their philosophy dictated that peace was a lie, but this was a self-fulfilling prophecy that saw those who craved power powerless before forces that could not be tamed and those who craved wealth bereft of riches and life. So were the Sith invariably ensnared by a vain and vicious ideology that foisted the blame on others for their failures, causing the flames of hatred to consume them until all that was left was bitterness and rage. Telling themselves that this was the necessary state of being, the *true* nature of the Force, they paradoxically sought revenge against those they deemed had brought them to that state, the Jedi and Republic, engineering one violent convulsion after another while becoming worn down by betrayal and infighting.

Ultimately, it would be Darth Vitiate who would bring order out of the chaos, allowing twelve surviving claimants to keep their elevated titles so long as they remained subordinate to him as the prophesied Sith'ari. In 4980 BBY, this Dark Council was crafted on Dromund Kaas. Said to be descended from StarCrow the Wise and a member of the Shadow Council, Vitiate was one of the rare few able to extend the bourne of sapient life by means of consensual integration with one of the Outer Gods. As such, he was extremely patient and risk-averse, keeping his Sith in hiding on Dromund Kaas for seventeen hundred years. Some of his Council grumbled and tried to overthrow the Emperor so as to pursue vendettas against the Republic or lay claim to his throne, but Vitiate foiled every revolt, imprisoning their disloyal spirits in the Dark Temple and purging the entire Council at least twice thereafter.

THE FALSE FREEDOM OF FREEDON NADD

As the two heads often do not align, for chaos and order are opposed, so it was that resurgence of Sith activity in the galaxy came about from ones unassociated with Vitiate and his Dark Council. It would emerge from the Mecrosa of Nyssa, the Krath of Empress Teta, the Naddists of Onderon, and the Lumenatus Club of Arkania.

The Mecrosa Order was spawned from Korribani remnants (bolstered by the absorption of Darth Vassago's lineage) fleeing the Great Hyperspace War. They infiltrated the Tapani House of Mecetti through the political machinations of Viscountess Mireya, who granted the Sith Lords of Vjun tax-free holdings on Nyssa, and went on to breed a new generation of ignoble Sith Knights.

The secret society of the Lumenatus had been formed from Arkanian Sith elements fleeing the destruction of the great library of Veeshas Tuwan with the goal of outma-

neuvering the deadly GenoHaradan, who had become implicit agents of the Republic since their earliest involvement in the Hundred-Year War, and the secular Star Cabal, who manipulated political currents to bring about the extinction of Jedi, Sith, and all Forceful races.

These two lineages would now join with the followers of Freedon Nadd.

Freedon Nadd's turn to the Dark Side had come early in his life. The Jedi Masters had not meant to be unkind when they passed him over for knighthood, doing so despite how exceedingly good a student he'd been, but this part of his final test was cruel and ill-conceived… Confused and devastated, young Nadd went to the most ancient master on Ossus, Matta Tremayne, for direction, only to be ignored and then told he must find his own path. Feeling confused, hurt, and abandoned, he gave vent to his grief in foolish words, at which point, she challenged him to prove himself, drawing her saber. By the time he realized that this was all part of a test, it was too late; he'd made the killing stroke. Waves of guilt and grief gave way to denunciation as he cursed his arrogance and theirs. That was when the darkness closed in.

And in the darkness spoke the voices of the damned, leading Freedon Nadd on a path to Ashas Ree in Sith space where he uncovered the holocron of King Adas and one of the amulets of Darth Dreadwar which had been lost when Lord Garu perished. This led him to Nilrebmah XIII, where he approached the ensnared spirit of Dreadwar. But, finding him ill-mannered and disagreeable, he departed once again.

Nadd continued on to Yavin 4. Deemed worthy by the saturnine Massassi sentinels, Nadd was permitted entrance into the noctuary depths of the otherwise inviolable Great Temple. And there, past the ophidian–carved pylons and the orichalch tablets of astronomical parapegms, in the yawning penumbra of the Grand Throne Room before a brazen menhir, emerged the re-animated Naga Sadow.

Years of Sadow's marcescent tutelage enabled Nadd to grow and embed his malefical lessons into a holocron of his own. He was even rewarded Naga Sadow's Force Crystal, which he later gifted to a paramour on Seidhkona. But trinkets and rewards didn't concern him. He would not repeat the mistakes of his youth nor play second fiddle to an eremite whose time had come and gone. Nadd had a preternatural proclivity for concealing his emotions, so Sadow had no inkling of his true feelings. Once he determined that he'd learned all there was to learn from his august master, he murdered him, leaving nothing but a specter clinging to a sarcophagus, bereft of power.

Confident in his dominance yet wary of forging a fiefdom large enough to attract the attention of two potential threats before he was ready to deal with them—Dreadwar, who might yet find a means of escape, and a mysterious, hidden Dark Lord in the Unknown Regions that he had earlier heard whispers of—he set forth in search of a world to rule, and, once again, the darkness guided his course…

The orbital configuration of Onderon and Dxun aroused Nadd's curiosity, which was further stirred by legends of King Adas' spirit lurking in the wilderness. Conquering Onderon's people and constructing the massive city of Iziz, Nadd ruled the planet for over a century during which time he married Onderon's royal daughter, Princess Taleen Kira, and had children with her. As political opposition arose from his wife's family, she urged him against exterminating them and to instead exile them beyond

the wall. He would come to lament this kindness, as long years later, Naddist loyalists were still fending off dissidents, now in the form of the Beast Riders.

It was at this time that a secret strike team of Jedi Shadows learned of the conflict and sought out Onderon. As they would not suffer a Sith Lord to live, they ended Nadd's life, allowing the kingdom to pass to his heirs. But Nadd's spirit endured, tainting and corrupting the world's rulers, which culminated in the debasement of his descendent King Ommin and his wife Queen Amanoa.

Yet with the failure of both to restore the Sith to their former heights, the spirit of Freedon Nadd sought out others to teach. The first would be the spoiled Tetan nobles, Aleema and Satal Keto. Fascinated by occult mysteries, they had begun the Krath cult on Koros Major and pursued rumors of the taboo within their wealthy circles. Some of these spoke of the Lumenatus Club and elusive elements within Core World high society, such as the board members of the blossoming Czerka Corporation and academicians of Adascorp. These had profited off the pillage and rapine of the Lorell Raiders, instigated the Great Droid Revolution, and funded the construction of a Korriban academy under the guise of luring talent to an extralegal tax haven.

Traveling to Coruscant, the Ketos stole a Sith tome from the Galactic Museum with the surreptitious aid of Dark Side antiquities curator Pollard Seario. Upon learning of Sith loyalists fighting in the ongoing Beast Wars, they came to Onderon seeking out someone to help them understand the spellbook's secrets. Due to the machinations of Queen Amanoa, the Jedi had returned once more to destroy Freedon Nadd and end the monarchy of Onderon. But this time, the Jedi failed, leading to the death of the queen and capture of Jedi Master Arca Jeth. Brought before King Ommin, who could see that the Ketos were the future of the Dark Side, the king offered Satal the ancient amulet passed down from Freedon Nadd in exchange for a copy of the Sith tome. But several Jedi, including Ulic Qel-Droma, Cay Qel-Droma, and Nomi Sunrider, then infiltrated the palace to rescue Arca Jeth. The siblings fled with some of the king's treasures while Ommin was cut down by Ulic and destroyed by Nadd.

Freedon Nadd's sarcophagus was then ordered by the Jedi to be exhumed and his tomb moved off of Onderon. Yet *still* his corrupt spirit remained active and untethered, prophesying to Ulic Qel-Droma that he would "become one of the great ones!"

Nadd's next student, however, was the prideful Jedi, Exar Kun.

After leaving his training under Master Vodo-Siosk Baas, Exar Kun went in search of forbidden lore, following a trail from Onderon to Nadd's newly constructed tomb on the dark side of Dxun. Nadd gifted Kun with the scrolls of Naga Sadow, which sent him to the Valley of the Dark Lords on Korriban. And there, within the Hall of the Undying, before the glowering statues and whispering remains of Dreadwar and the Ankath, an ancient soul-snare held the spirits of vanquished Jedi.

As Exar Kun looked for a means of freeing these spirits, the sprit of Freedon Nadd caused the stones above to fall upon him, shattering Kun's body. The suffering Jedi called out to Master Baas, but Nadd cut him off. In this way was Exar Kun impelled to embrace the Dark Side or die.

Meanwhile, armed with the powers taught to them by Freedon Nadd, the Ketos overthrew their parents and usurped the Tetan monarchy, prompting a Jedi response. This led to a counterattack on Deneba where Satal Keto had Master Arca Jeth killed.

A grieving Ulic Qel-Droma vowed to stop the Krath and, against the better judgement of his friends and allies, infiltrated their society. Aleema saw through the ruse but opted instead to play along so that she might seduce him. By means of her maneuvering that forced him to participate in dark deeds and a poison that increased his rage, she succeeded. But only after he avenged Master Jeth's death and killed her brother, Satal, did he partner with her romantically and serve as co-ruler of the Krath. Nomi and his brother, Cay, who each yet loved him, would go on to make several attempts to bring him back, all to no avail.

After being further tested by ravening Tuk'ata, Exar Kun was directed to Yavin 4. Still resentful at having been manipulated, but too prideful to turn back, he tried again to deny Nadd and the Dark Side, only to be attacked and imprisoned by Massassi in the Temple of Sacrifice where he was to be sacrificed to Naga Sadow's Sith Wyrm. Nadd goaded Kun to use the Dark Side and take the Dreadwar amulet from Zythmnr, the Massassi High Priest it had come down to. Realizing it would help him survive, Kun obeyed. The amulet trebled his power and allowed him to destroy the Sith Wyrm.

Triumphant that this was the Sith he'd long awaited, Nadd made a critical error and requested from his new apprentice the creation of a physical body that he would inhabit. But Exar Kun detested Nadd and used the amulet to obliterate him, leaving the wicked Sith only a moment to send a warning to Aleema of Kun's betrayal.

But the Dark Side had taken hold, and Kun saw himself as one of the great Sith kings of old. With loyal Massassi and thoughts of power and vengeance, he uncovered the secret lab of Naga Sadow and ordered temples erected to himself. He had but to deal with Nadd's other apprentices, which the amulet now revealed to him.

His arrival on Koros Major with the intent of eliminating his rivals prompted Aleema to give Qel-Droma the amulet King Ommin had earlier given her brother. When Kun drew near to fight him, the two amulets were activated, and there appeared the phantoms of Darth Dreadwar, Marka Ragnos, and a macabre host of their contemporaries who declared them Dark Lords of the Sith. That this was an elaborate illusion of Dreadwar's to make it seem as if the whole of the ancient Sith Empire were behind them did not take away from the actual power they suddenly themselves infused with. Henceforth, aligned as master and apprentice, they went about to bring down the Republic.

THE MASTER'S LAIR

For forty years, Jedi Master Sli'Lon Tahar followed a trail of evidence across the ancient Sith worlds of the Dentari sector (which meant "Lair of the Master" in the Balc speech). Now, with the amulets activated and the aid of a curious young Nyssan woman from the Shey Tapani University, Master Tahar came to the forgotten Nil-rebmah system to discover that Naga Sadow's former master, Darth Dreadwar, had survived and was plotting to draw Force-users to his world to complete the last part of his ritual that would grant him freedom from the diaphanous chains binding him.

But upon arriving on Deneba to warn the Jedi assembly gathered there, Krath forces struck en masse. Tahar managed to flee, but survivor's guilt crushed him for years until he met the odd but well-meaning crew of the *Luminic Line* who claimed

to be soldiers from the distant future. Helping him regain his bearings, they traveled together to Foerost, which came under attack by Mandalore the Indominatable. While fending off his incursions, Master Tahar sent the crew to warn the Jedi of the threat on Nilrebmah XIII. Tahar was soon afterwards struck down by Ulic Qel-Droma but not before the Jedi traitor learned of the mission Tahar had sent them on.

The Jedi of Ossus were not as inclined to trust the strange time-traveling soldiers and incarcerated them for further interrogation. Jedi Master Orb Telorn, however, knew Master Tahar well and believed they were telling the truth. So, together with his apprentice, Dace Vinagar, they agreed to help the soldiers on the condition that they first go to Nilrebmah to obtain evidence to bring before the Jedi Council or, if possible, destroy Danar's tomb and any lethal relics that might have survived the ages.

What Master Telorn failed to realize was that Vinagar was serving as a double-agent for Exar Kun. When they reached the planet, the Jedi Master noted the strong current of malice. This was underscored by an attack of Sithspawn and an army of armored skeletons. The distraction allowed Vinagar to split from the others and penetrate into the accursed heart of the Dread Monolith to where he was summoned.

Under Dreadwar's guidance, Vinagar began the invultuation that he believed would allow him to overthrow Exar Kun and make him the reigning Sith Lord. As an undead entity, Dreadwar did not require as many living resources as before to affect his cantraips. He needed but to attain the highest puissance that the antemundane energy-stream of the ether would bestow; Vinagar was but a pawn in this scheme.

Following the whispered voice's commands and sedulously chanting the black malisons from the ages-old holocryptic gramaries, Vinagar inaugurated the Great Ritual, harnessing the life-forces of the interlopers into the crude engines of the Monolith so that Nilrebmah XIII might move once again. But when Vinagar's own life-force began to be drained by the harrowing spell, he cried out to the Dark Lord.

Several things next happened in succession. Vauvert, the ancient Energy Hydra, reemerged, aroused by the events befalling his world and hungry for the power being channeled. Spotting the shrieking Dace Vinagar, the creature swallowed him whole. This mattered little to Dreadwar since the spell's effect was in full force and he would soon be free. But as the dreadful night sky blazed with invidious energy, Ulic Qel-Droma himself arrived. Sensing a rival power in Vauvert that would rise to usurp them, he shot down and killed the raging Energy Hydra.

But for Dreadwar, the enchantment was complete, and he prepared to depart at last. That was when he felt a sudden block. Something or someone was placing a restraint upon his Monolith, re-channeling power back into the etiolated hosts. *This should not be possible!* Then he remembered Master Orb Telorn! Savagely did he rise from his cimmerian fane to refocus the effluent currents—but too late! The redirected energy continued to divagate, resulting in an arcane stasis charm ramified over the entire system. Spheres collided as the swirling vortex of a Force Storm ignited in the heavens above them. Then all fell still again.

The Jedi Master's sacrifice allowed his team to return home and kept Darth Dreadwar out of the Old Sith Wars!

THE OLD SITH WARS

Much has been told of the Old Sith Wars that followed. They who had been scattered across the galaxy in the Diaspora now amalgamated into a loose, feudal Sith Empire directed by the Naddists, Krath, and the Mecrosa Order under their prophesied leaders. Inaugurated in the Great Sith War, they were joined by the Mandalorian Crusaders under Mandalore the Indomitable, a hardline militaristic follower of the Canons of Honor. Their union would last no longer than a year, with the many regimes dismantled by the Jedi or betrayed from within: Aleema Keto by Exar Kun and Ulic Qel-Droma; Kun by Qel-Droma; and the Mecrosa's High Lady Brezwalt III—on the cusp of an open, sector-spanning Mecrosa Empire—by her own House of Mecetti who'd allowed Jedi Shadows to infiltrate and defeat the order in what is called the Cleansing of the Nine Houses.[227]

In the tragic events that followed, after Uliq Qel-Droma killed his own brother in battle, Nomi Sunrider hit him with a grim and arcane blast. *Sever force* is a form of *derriph midwan* that cuts the Force from the individual by eradicating their Midichlorians. Iniquitous as this act was, it reawakened the Ulic of old…

In his first act of redemption, he went forth to aid the Republic and put an end to the threat of Exar Kun.[228] But his guilt left him a broken man wandering the Outer Rim. He soon found some comfort in the arms of a Mandalorian Shield-Maiden, Valdhani, who bore him a son strong in the Force.

Ulic never forgot his erstwhile Nomi, who was now Jedi Grand Master, and he gave his son to the Jedi for training, after which he left Cathar for boreal Rhen Var. There he thought his life would fade away… but Vima Sunrider had other plans and came to him for training, reigniting the light within that he'd thought lost.

PRODIGAL KNIGHTS

With the death of the redeemed Ulic Qel Droma and the murder of Valdhani at the hands of her own Mandalorians on Cathar, their son grew up without knowing his parents. Only a few Jedi, including his Master, Arren Kae, knew the truth, seeing the name 'Naak' ("peace" in Mandalorian) sewn on the swaddling cloth that the Qel-Droma babe had come wrapped in. Years hence, after ascending the ranks to become a respected Jedi Knight, Master Kae disclosed to him the truth of his heritage.[229]

Things might have turned out differently had not the corrupted politics of his day changed Revan's course. Disgusted by the Jedi Council's apathy to the butchery of the Neo-Crusaders who'd massacred the Cathar in an extreme and egregious interpretation of the Canons of Honor, the young Qel-Droma and his friend Alek began a

[227] Lady Brezwalt's poisoners survived to become the famed assassins of Darth Revan's Sith Empire and subsequent Triumvirate, and other Sith remained at large amidst House Mecetti, keeping that lineage alive. With Lumiya having made Château Bast her temporary home following Darth Vader's death, deriving her power from a holocron drawn from the Mecrosa's vaults on Nyssa, there can be no doubt this shadowy influence is still being felt today.

[228] Exar Kun's follower, Larad Noon, considered the relativist philosophies of the Heresiarchs a revelation and wove them into the Potentium, which later inspired Nikkos Tyris to create the Jensaarai.

[229] Sedriss QL also claimed direct descent from Ulic Qel-Droma, no idle boast given his bloodline.

military campaign against the Mandalorians, causing several from the Order to join them and triggering civil unrest. Notwithstanding that they won victory upon victory, the war saw them turning cold and hard as bit-by-bit they compromised their ethics.

Already teetering on the edge, the discovery of a Rakatan Star Map on Dantooine and the Trayus Academy on Malachor V was a turning point for the partners, exposing them to the fevered inveiglement and obscure incunablia embedded in its secreted lore, which served as a window upon a sinister reticulation from the galaxy's ancient past that led to the present brutality of the Mandalorians, behind which some tenebrous hand seemed to be steering events. These fears were confirmed by Revan's defeat of Mandalore the Ultimate above Malachor V.

The successor of Mandalore the Indomitable, who'd been killed on Dxun, Mandalore the Ultimate claimed to have recovered his Mask from the body of his predecessor. That he never removed it in the presence of others and was regarded by his followers as the Great Shadow Father was no whimsy. Early in his life, he'd been given a vision on Shogun of the end of the Taung, and rather than fight against this dark prophecy, he embraced it. The warriors of mixed races that his forerunners had welcomed to fight alongside them he now called Mandalorians, giving them equal share in the honor and bounty of conquest. To cement this unity, he never exposed his Taung face, a symbolic gesture ostensibly representing the decline of his species in favour of a uniform Mandalorian culture.[230]

So begat a campaign of recruitment, drawing warriors from numerous worlds who wanted to take down corrupt governments and contemptible peoples across the galaxy. But evil overshadowed the thoughts and deeds of these Neo-Crusaders. When Revan defeated Mandalore the Ultimate in hand-to-hand combat, taking the Mask he wore which represented their highest authority, he learned from the dying leader that the Neo-Crusaders and he had been puppeteered by a hidden Sith unlike all others.

This led Revan and Alek on a sodden trail to find the source, travelling from Rekkiad, where they hid the Mask, to Nathema, where they learned of the murder of Lord Dramath by his son Tenebrae, whom Marka Ragnos had titled Lord Vitiate. So ghastly was this Vitiate that after putting his father's spirit inside a holocron so he could further torment him, he'd gone on to commit the ancient, execrable rite of *rakhkfrûm*. Succeeding where others before him had failed, he absorbed all life from the planet to give himself a lifespan beyond the count of years.

From Nathema, Revan and Alec learned of Dromund Kaas, and there, posing as mercenaries, they came to infiltrate the Sith Empire under Darth Vitiate… who patiently and preternaturally awaited their arrival!

THE EXILE

It has oft been stated that Revan and Alek aught to have first reported back to the Republic and the Jedi rather than attempt to take Vitiate out on their own, and so

[230] Though Mandalore the Ultimate may have had more sinister reasons for this, the symbolic act would be misinterpreted and appropriated in future generations by hardline Mandalorian sects such as the Children of the Watch.

they might have had those organizations not scapegoated them for what had occurred on Malachor V during the war, in what is now known as the Jedi Civil War, or the Second Sith War, the atrocities of which were laid at the feet of Meetra Surik.

Born Neema Freestar before taking the Meetra Surik name, the figure most commonly known as the "Jedi Exile" was the second daughter of Nomi Sunrider. Neema shared her mother's talents, which her half-sister Vima cautiously nurtured in her. Vima Sunrider had become a great Jedi, and her other student, Bastila Shan, had learned the rare talent of Battle Meditation, with which she later single-handedly turned the tide at the Battle of the Star Forge, bringing about the Sith's defeat.

For Meetra Surik, however, a darker path lay before her. Having witnessed the mass genocide brought on by the Neo-Crusaders, Surik came to believe in Revan's cause and quickly rose to the rank of general, a role she came to regret when she was put in charge of what became the final battle against the Mandalorians.

After being apprised of the fact that the bulk of Revan's forces would not arrive in time, Meetra was forced to make one of two terrible choices, and it is said that the agonizing deliberation turned her hair white. She could not allow the Neo-Crusaders to win this engagement. If they did, the war would drag on for years to come. But if she used the Mass Shadow Generator that Revan had constructed to wipe them out, she'd be killing not only the Neo-Crusaders but all of her own forces, not to mention devastating all the many innocents that hadn't yet evacuated Malachor V.

But how many will die if I don't act? From the bridge of her ship, she gave the order and watched in horror as the hammer-blow fell. So devastating was this device that, had not some primal instinct caused her to use *sever force* on herself, she would have perished as well. And so she survived, though she wished she hadn't. As one dead inside, she went back to the Jedi Council to explain her actions, hoping that perhaps they would take the one life that had so cruelly been spared… her own. But they did not, and it is said that the Force does nothing without a reason.

TENEBRAE'S TRICKERY

Had they not been so diminished in the light, Qel-Droma and Alek might have been able to defeat Darth Vitiate. But this was no mere Dark Lord. Something *else* animated the mind and body of the one called Tenebrae, some *thing* that the darkened Jedi knew could not be allowed to remain amongst the living. With a will as strong as beskar, Vitiate sought to dominate their hearts and minds and bring them fully to the Dark Side. Many thought this was the turning point for the two sullied heroes, but Revan and Alek made a choice. It was the same choice Revan's father had made and for the same reasons: to stay alive long enough to gain the power they would need to destroy the darkness; and as the shadow was already in them, the thing that dwelt inside Vitiate accepted their *conversions*.

So they became Darth Revan and Darth Malak. Now, as the pretended thralls of Vitiate, they accepted their mission to go in search of the Star Forge.

Uncovering three additional Star Maps as well as the hoary tombs of the ancient Sith Lords on Korriban, they made their way to Lehon and its Star Forge, looking not to bring a great prize to their master, but to use this monstrous device for the purpose

of raising an empire from the remnants of the Republic, a *Sith* Empire that could defeat not only Vitiate, but the arcane potency that underpinned his regime on Dromund Kaas: the foul and unspeakable True Sith in the Unknown Regions that the hoarded missals of the Trayus Core hinted of. It was fear of the power Vitiate held impelled Revan and Malak to do this, to justify all of the horrific actions they took to win—assassination, torture, and the forced conversion of Jedi. And Vitiate *knew!*

He had known all along… It did not matter to him that they did not serve him directly or that they championed a rival ideology. Even the powerful Star Forges did not matter. All that mattered was that they'd turned to the Dark Side, for that alone would ensure that, whether by intent or not, they served the Way of the Dark!

THE TRIUMVIRATE

Revan revived the remnants of Exar Kun's Sith Brotherhood on Korriban, though their resurgence would be short-lived. In the War of the Star Forge that followed, Malak pushed Revan too far, deriding him for being soft, at which point the inflamed Revan took his saber and severed Malak's jaw from his skull, forcing him to wear a metal prosthesis and speak by means of a vocabulator. Deeply resentful at this humiliation and betrayal, the ambitious Malak turned on his former friend with a hail of turbolaser fire from his flagship, the *Leviathan*.

Revan's flickering life was saved by Bastila Shan who *bonded* with him. His amnesiac mind was then reprogrammed by the Jedi Council with false memories of an invented identity so that Revan turned against his own Sith Empire. His real memories were eventually restored, and with the black stain of the Dark Side lifted, he led the Republic to the Star Forge at Lehon, bringing about the destruction of the invidious battle station and a decisive end to Darth Malak and the Second Sith War.

Though the Sith Empire they'd created fractured in civil war, from its ashes burst the Dark Wars spearheaded by the Sith Triumvirate led by Revan's former Jedi Master, Darth Traya, and her two baleful apprentices, Darth Nihilus and Darth Sion, who'd received rare tutoring in the starry wisdom of the Ankath.

Master Arren Kae, who had donned the alias *Kreia* from the portmanteau of Kae and Traya, had turned to the Dark Side years earlier. After the Jedi Council blamed her unconventional methods for the fall of Revan, the students who joined him, and her surreptitious aid of the Revanchist faction, she went into exile. But it wouldn't be until her discovery of the Trayus Academy on Malachor V and the corrupting incunabula of the Shadow Council that she became Darth Traya. As her teachings had always been unorthodox, so were they even after embracing the Sith mantle.

Darth Sion was a former Sith Marauder for Exar Kun. He too delved into the caliginous abrogations of the Lich Lords from the Trayus Core, the same extreme and seldom employed version of *ukûbokum* that the Ninûshwodzakut, Andeddu, and the remnant of the Exiles had used to become nefandous undead kings.

Darth Nihilus was the other impossible survivor of the Mass Shadow Generator superweapon that had ended the Mandalorian Wars. Taking his sobriquet from the Nihil Retreat, he plumbed the depths of those ghastly, life-devouring techniques of *rakhkfrûm* by which countless victims could be sapped to feed the dark appetites of

its master, and this power came easily to him. Where Sion turned his fury and assassins against the Jedi, Nihilus was far less discriminating. A beast born of genocide, what humanity Nihilus once possessed was long-since gone.

The Sith Triumvirate degenerated into a Duumvirate after Lords Nihilus and Sion began to take umbrage at the constant rebukes and abstruse teachings of Darth Traya, who censured the wasteful and foolish ways in which the Lord of Pain and Lord of Hunger put their energies. It took both to overcome Traya, severing her from the Force so that they might continue their atrocities unimpeded.

What manner of being Nihilus became afterwards was a matter unknown even to his subjects, whose name it was forbidden to speak. Some called him the Apostate of Rhand, but in the tales of his devouring of Katarr and other worlds rich in life, there are clear comparisons to Darth Vitiate and the Eldritch Powers of the Cosmic Wars. His Hendanyn Death Mask and black cerements of a Sith Lord were little more than trappings concealing something older and fouler than anything of this galaxy.

Having herself been sundered from the Force at the Battle of Malachor V, Meetra Surik was able to not only resist Nihilus' indomitable powers but bring the physical mockery of his ethereous being to its end, killing Sion and Traya shortly thereafter.

Ending the Dark Wars, Surik left known space in search of Revan, who had departed to the Unknown Regions years earlier to search out and put an end to the True Sith. Meetra Surik left behind a motley assortment of pupils known as the Lost Jedi, and it was these who spearheaded the revival of the Order after the Jedi Purge.

THE VERIFICATION OF UNITY

During the final years of the Sith Civil War, Visas Marr, one of Surik's foremost pupils, joined forces with the Jedi Guardian Belaya, who was the lover of the famed Cathar Jedi, Juhani. Marr's dreams had been haunted by disturbing imagery of dead worlds and writhing shadows, which she inscribed in her journals. When a new threat emerged in Karnak Tetsu of the Sorcerers of Tund, she believed this to be the menace that Revan and Surik had gone in search of, and together they went forth to defeat it.

Before dedicating themselves to the philosophy of the Unity, the Sorcerers of Tund traveled beyond Tund in a ritual sojourn called the Verification, which was intended to ascertain the Unity's claim that all reality is the Force. While most returned with their commitment to their cosmology redoubled, Karnak Tetsu resisted.

Consumed by the petty pleasures of the galaxy, the "illusion of the material world," and with a flair for the dramatic, he declared himself Karnak the Maleficent, elevating himself above his peers to become the Lord of Tund before conquering the planet Damec, which he renamed Karnak Alpha, so as to create a redoubt of power in the waning days of the Dark Wars. After terrorizing the citizens of Karnak Alpha for over five years, turning his victims' tongues into snakes and water into poison, Karnak's reign of terror was brought to an end by Visas Marr and Belaya.

As Marr had believed, incorrectly, that the Tundites were all there was of the True Sith, the Order supposed the danger overcome and declared the Old Sith Wars over. But these were but stepping stones to powers far older and more ruinous…

SECTION II: WARS AND RUMORS OF WARS

THE EXTIRPATION OF DARTH VITIATE

From the Sith Civil War emerged Darth Execrari, a cannibalistic, black-furred Wookiee who kept the lineage alive in a throne room of subterranean magma beneath the icy Citadel of Ziost. The last of his line would be the Feeorin, Darth Trocious, who would be killed by a team of Jedi after instigating the Iridonians to attack the Republic two centuries before the Great Galactic War, the start of the Inter-Sith Wars period. While a Human remnant of Trocious' loyalists fled to reestablish a power base on the isolated world of Paecia to build up a force of arms to protect themselves from possible Sith or Republic reprisals, the ancient Sith remnant on Dromund Kaas bolstered its house to make its move.

Vitiate's conquest of the galaxy began with the Great Galactic War in 3681 BBY and ended nearly thirty years later with the victory at the Sacking of Coruscant, which led to the Treaty of Coruscant. Not all of the Republic acceded to this coup, and a cold war between these forces commenced until the resumption of major conflicts in the Galactic War of 3643 BBY.

Much discussion has been had on this complex period and its many twists and turns. Suffice it to say that the Sith were beset by many of the same inescapable flaws that had undone their contemporaries, and perhaps it is for this reason that the inscrutable Emperor Vitiate betrayed his own empire in favor of a second regime, the Eternal Empire, which he had secretly constructed on Zakuul under the name Valkorion.

This time, however, his battle-honed Dark Council divined through acuminated auguries a fitting retribution against Vitiate, and casting aside Sith pride to ally with the Republic in the War Against Zakuul, they helped bring about the final demise of the execrated energumen at the hands of his many foes in a vicious battle of wills.

With the end of Tenebrae/Vitiate/Valkorian and the succeeding emperor, Vowrawn, and the wars waged by those such as Darth Malgus, Darth Desolous, and Darth Phobos, the Inter-Sith Wars finally came to an end over sixteen centuries after Vitiate's spiritual death.

THE PAECIAN EMPIRE

Over five hundred years later, the small planet of Paecia became the seat of a futile attempt at reviving the Sith Empire. After failing his Jedi training, Saalo Morn stormed back to his homeworld of Paecia with the stolen spellbook of Freedon Nadd and his master's helmet, an ancient artifact that trebled the wearer's powers. His master had rarely employed it, save against the most dangerous foes, for fear of abusing the gift that had passed down the ages to him.

Dreaming of a new Sith Order and assuming it was none other than Freedon Nadd himself leading him, Saalo Morn, after a sickening display of violence, proclaimed himself Dark Lord before Paecia's gathered Human citizens. And as Freedon Nadd had done before him, he exiled any who objected to his rule, sending many to a penal

colony on neighboring Dathomir. Of those who remained, Morn enjoined them to put their talents and technology to use enhancing their marauding galleons, which became the powerful Kaarenth Cruisers. These ion cannons would be used to bring down ships passing through the Quelii sector. With the power of the helm and Nadd's spellbook, Morn went to war against the Fere, Drackmarians, and Chevin, sending against them phantasmal legions, reanimated dead, advanced droids, and mutagenically-enslaved, borg-implanted Iskalloni. King Morn and his handpicked Kaarenth Impalers transformed the Paecian Empire from a small but powerful fiefdom ruling over the Quelii sector to the stuff of legends whispered of in taverns and cantinas across the Outer Rim.

Before Morn were routinely paraded the unlucky captives of his ventures in the hopes that he might find a worthy apprentice. But this ideal candidate would ever elude him. For all its victories, the Paecian Empire burned bright and fast, collapsing a short time later in 2992 BBY when Morn's Impalers failed to conquer the Drackmarian warlords who hesitated not in putting Saalo Morn to death. His wretched spirit, bound to his repurposed helm, endured in a crypt surrounded by the sarcophagi of rejected students, while his precious artifacts were acquired and sold by an opportunistic Paecian trader. Only after he was in his tomb did Morn discover that it had not been the spirit of Freedon Nadd that had guided him all those years but the spirit of the Dread Mother who had her own plans for Dathomir.

Without Force adepts or successors to the Paecian Throne, the otherwise secular kingdom lost its armies, reputation, and penal colony on Dathomir as the slaves revolted, taking advantage of the opportunity for freedom to join with a remnant from an earlier age. Ironically, it was these very ones that Morn had imprisoned who had the gifts that he had long sought for in an apprentice.

SOLIPSISTIC SITH

It was the dawning of the Draggulch Period (2000 to 1000 BBY), and many races were foretelling the return of the shadow and war. Before Darth Ruin fell to utter insanity, he had been the scholarly Jedi Master Protogonus Phanius. Elements of imbalance were ever present with Phanius, though by and large he kept his abstractions and feelings of derealization to himself.

Then he stole the holocron of Darth Dreadwar.

The teachings in it preyed on his detached, distorted ruminations and repressed narcissism. But as he attempted to live a double-life, he found it harder to hold his thoughts back, and soon found himself censured by the Council, who suspected that something was wrong with him. Though they offered their help, his anomie had already set in, and he departed thereafter to be regarded as one of "The Lost," a Jedi Master who'd voluntarily left the Order and served as a reminder of their limitations.

In his rejection of moral dualism, Phanius turned to the Dark Side with a measure of glee and then, as Darth Ruin, vowed to make the Jedi pay for having rejected the truth. The Umbaran delved deeper into the holocron's guarded mysteries, prompting him along to his next mission. Peeling away fifty of his erstwhile peers from the Jedi Order, he went forth to unite the surviving clans and sects of Vitiate's fallen empires.

By now, Sith bloodlines had become so diluted as to be indistinguishable from 10th degree Humans, but few remembered or cared any longer about such things.

Ruin's efforts bore fruit, leading to a new Sith regime that for a thousand years would assail the Republic in the New Sith Wars. Recalling Saalo Morn's Paecian Empire, they came to Paecia in search of weapons and artifacts. But greater power was found on its neighboring world, and a Sith Academy was established on Dathomir that offered to train potential Force-sensitives in the "true way of the Force."

Darth Ruin's madness was not mitigated by his success, and in his journals and correspondences, he repeatedly made the claim that, "I, Darth Ruin, am the original founder of the Sith Order!" It wouldn't be until after exploring Force-soaked Tund and attempting and failing to penetrate Mortis that he became convinced that his mind presented the only actual reality. The galaxy and all its peoples were but representations of that mind, anything outside of which did not exist. "Now I, Ruin, am Master of the Universe," he crowed. "There is *nothing*; only *me*!" He had long been obsessed with notions of solipsism, spurred on by the holocron's disquieting talk of minds appearing from "random fluctuations in the thermodynamic equilibrium" to neuroscientific theories of "simulated hallucinatory realities isomorphic to a potentially simulated consensus reality," but his full embrace of this earned him the loathing of even his most ardent followers, and his "Rule of Me" became so utterly rejected that his entire kingdom fought against him on Roon—which Ruin had made his capital out of the belief that he'd named it after himself when he created the universe.

By virtue of his ravelled psychosis, Darth Ruin had powers that had only been seen before in the most ancient of Sith sovereigns. Fifty Sith Lords attacked him, only to be summarily disintegrated with a gaze! Yet, far from omnipotent, his undoing would come from the quick thinking of his young Zeltron squire Eradicus, who challenged the madman's god-complex and tricked him into erasing himself from existence.

Irrespective of the intense hatred he'd received during his life, there came about those who admired his audaciousness and held him up as a paragon, and as these inamaratos rose to power, the screeds of Syn were abandoned in the frenzy of iconoclasm that placed Ruin's deranged ramblings as the defining code of the New Sith. For such ones, there was no need to look further back, and they accepted without question Ruin's claim as their founder.[231] With disinterest in truth, Ruin came to be remembered as the Sith's apotheotic founder and was conflated with legends of Xendor, whose ancient spirit had been raised by the necromancies of Darth Eradicus, a decision he soon regretted when the Dark Underlord made him his inferior. Both were soon brought to their end by the Jedi.

Amongst the most well-known of the New Sith was Zoiya Relle. The Empress Dowager ruled her feudal dynasty as the *de facto* monarch behind the throne of her mentally enslaved son Joff. Following her reign came Darth Rivan, a longeval Zelosian Dark Lord of considerable power who followed the Creed of Ruin; his

[231] Though disdained by his contemporaries, the philosophy of Darth Ruin was considered the truth by Lord Daiman, who, in his own embrace of solipsism, came to believe he came up with it himself!

sovereignty was contested by his rival, Belia Darzu, who rejected the Darth cult as a form of madness and usurped his rule.

At this time, Rivan attained possession of a strange and powerful artifact in the Cularin system that had long haunted his dreams, the mysterious and deadly Darkstaff of Rauggoth, and used it to summon a Force Storm to destroy Darzu and his rivals.

But the Darkstaff had a mind of its own, and opened a dimension-rending portal that drained Rivan of the Force and deposited him on Ruusan a century later. With him came his second apprentice, Arrakad, a Sylphe warrior known as the Lord of the Foliage of Sainte-Evanëflore. Arrakad had been bonded to Rivan by a ritual that prevented him from straying too far from his master. Taking advantage of this turn of events, Arrakad slew Darth Rivan and walked off content for the first time in years.[232]

Meanwhile, the Republic took back several worlds, including Dathomir. Troubled by the disparate and hostile bands of natives, many of whom were Force-sensitive, they turned it back to a penal colony. So it would remain until they exiled the rogue Jedi Knight, Allya, who tamed the feral Rancors and united the tribes under her. After an attempted overthrow by the men of several former tribes who would not accept a female ruler, she enslaved the males and forged the famed Witches of Dathomir.[233]

The umpteenth collapse into civil war left the order in such a state of disrespair that even the Sith despaired, branding what they called the "War of the Fittest" as the *Curse of Qalydon*, and the *Darth* title was held thereafter to be taboo. In a rare moment of self-reflection, the Sith began to see the errors of the creed they had so blindly embraced, even while remaining enslaved to its sublunary greed. A heretical philosophy of egalitarianism proposed by the fallen Jedi, Skere Kaan, was now accepted as the panacea that would save them from total dissolution.

So was the Brotherhood of Darkness forged. And a mere ten years later, at the Battle of Ruusan, it would be undone by the machinations of Darth Bane. Bane saw the doctrine of equality as antithetical to the archetypal Sith's philosophy of hierarchy and dominance, which he'd studied in the verboten, pre-Ruin manuscripts of the Sith Archives. He tricked Lord Kaan and the Brotherhood into annihilating themselves with a ritual called the *thought bomb* that had been developed by Darth Vitiate as a power akin to *rakhkfrûm* and would wipe out all Force-sensitives within the bomb's radius.

Starting with him and Darth Zannah, Bane's iteration of the New Sith would operate in the shadows under the newly inaugurated Rule of Two, which he'd derived in a bizarre but logical extrapolation from the dyarchies of Revan and his copycat Rivan. This philosophy would be undone a thousand years later by Emperor Palpatine, who claimed it had served its purpose in bringing him to supreme power. With the death of Darth Sidious and sacrifice of Darth Vader, Bane's lineage was ultimately defeated.

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[232] The Cosmic Wars caused a schism amongst the Sylphe, with those from Sainte-Evanëflore staying true to the way of the Celestials while those from Sylvia IV became warriors and martial artists. The latter, however, served nobly until the Disaster of Arrakad, where the entire Sylphe contingent of the Azul Brigade died from exposure due to Republic military incompetence. The event so radicalised the Sylphe that even the reigning Lord of the Foliage foreswore pacifism and adopted the name of Darth Arrakad as a symbol of his peoples' vengeance.

[233] Allya's *Book of Shadows* conflates the Celestials with the Lords of the Galaxy, deeming the latter as Elder Gods, a not-common mistake made by several.

CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

THE TRAGEDY OF SEIDHKONA

SECTION I: THE STREGA AND THE MIND-WITCHES

In the passage of long and strange years, some of the youthful descendants of the wealthy Seid Hetarai were overcome by ennui. Their great opulence ceased to enchant them; their patrons wearied them; their spells of fortune seemed trite and mundane. They had long heard legends of their Sith ancestry, of the immemorial sorcerers who had terrified the galaxy and obscure myths of serpent-gods, magical artifacts, and weirdly wonderful worlds. These tales took such hold on their imaginations that they began to search for ancient troves said to be hidden on Seidhkona.

The Witch-Queens who first came to Seidhkona kept their magical books and paraphernalia well-concealed after their new civilization was established, intending to prevent a repeat of the events on Drômencas that had robbed the matriarchy of their power. But with the passage of epochs, what little survived became the treasured relics of a vanished age and displayed in the museums and palatial homes of the wealthy…

So did one of the most dangerous grimoires come into the hands of Tavani Kalenda.

Rewards from *The Codex of Revealing,* taken by Kalenda from her grandmother's estate, would not be given for free as she and her companions discovered upon casting a translation spell upon the blackened tome. A sacrifice in blood was required. This realization was a make-or-break moment that weeded out the dabblers from the serious practitioners who would see it through to whatever fate lay at its end. Committing themselves to this course, the group now named themselves the Strega.

With plasmic bonds and caustic spellcraft, the Strega agreed to covertly abduct certain patrons, choosing targets from amongst those who were of little prominence and would not be missed or whose disappearances and deaths could be blamed on accidents and reckless behaviors. With a show of grief and recompense made, underscoring the potential dangers of their world, this would even serve to attract more to their seductive harbor.

Drugged and taken to a secluded underground atelier within a natural cave surrounded in stone, the victims were splayed upon soft cushions of rouge velvet and lavender muslin. The gypsum walls had been polished until they'd shined, and upon them hung lubricious tapestries and painstakingly inscribed sigils. There was no need for a brazier, as the temperature was considered ideal, though a panorama of white candles, each atop its own candelabrum, lit the interior in an amber haze. At the back wall, an archway decoration had been carved out of bloodwood and crowned with the skull and horns of some local beast. Within its frame had been hung a

crimson curtain. With a mellifluous piping and the pleasant scents of cassia bark, styrax, and sandalwood wafting heavily in the air, the bacchanal rituals began.

The killing would come shortly after.

The blood of many imprudent youths was poured out that evening as the Strega croaked the blackest of invocations. At long last, the red curtain moved as if from a breeze, but the Strega knew that only stone lay behind it, and there were no currents in the room. Another minute would pass before it would flutter again.

Then there was a rending sound as if the planet's mantle had cracked open. Darkness fell upon the gathering. Minutes passed. The candles blazed with a vermilion effluence, and they could now see an unlit aperture where none had been.

From the black adit's penumbra seemed to creep things that aught not, odd forms that perambulated, rolled, and twitched. But they blinked and they were gone. Then, a noctambulistic adumbration with orbs of a chatoyant glow shuffled towards them. They laughed and opened their arms in anticipation of impending glory. But the things that came through did not offer transcendence. They did not make them kings or queens. They did not invite them to the land of riches beyond. Esurient, they had come only to feed… to feed on flesh… on fear… on their tainted, cruel spirits.

Some managed to race back to the presumed safety of the aboveground world, but that did not avail them, nor those who hid in old sepulchres where the dead of the original Seid Hetarai had been laid. The hungry ones and their homunculi would sniff and creep and listen, and find them. And then the biting would begin. And with none to close the door, and the strong scent of magic about, more kept coming.

In the aftermath of the Strega's invidious ceremony, it was as if a black cerement had fallen over Seidhkona. Nightmares stalked the streets and homes, transforming their world into a ghostland of death and ruin, rendering it unrecognizable to any who'd known it. Only a small remnant managed to survive, and for them, life was reduced to a short span of privation and madness. The lucky ones forged small groups amongst squabbling clans. But magic was no longer an aid to them; the barest trickle of a spell called forth the Rozzum that dwelt in the carcass of houses and buildings.

So was the famed civilization of Seidhkona brought to an end….

Months and years passed, and desperate people did desperate things, and from these were some offspring born. Some lasted by appeasing the gnawing things that skulked and muttered in the dark, and some were commanded by the fiends to kill those who begot them, but those who thrived had done so by banding together in cooperation and driving the ghouls and demons out to take back a semblance of sanity.

The Seid Hetarai would never return to the glory of their ancestors, but they refused to abandon what powers they had, though they had to be utilized in different ways now. But the worst of them became known as the Mind-Witches.

Relief eventually came, and many got offworld, though some, too far gone, stayed behind. And the rescuers marveled at the fall of Seidhkona—its glamorous pleasure gardens once overflowing with nectar and spice; its massive marble-carved halls and lascivious temples dedicated to strange and sensual gods; its inviting courtesans and laughing epicurean habitué from countless worlds… all in a fortnight torn down.

CAPTAIN EO AND THE LIFE-WITCH

Of the Seid Hetarai who'd escaped Seidhkona to achieve a measure of fame or infamy, one was Eva Kerlsil, who became the Grand High Witch and the self-styled Supreme Leader of Stokoryce, a sparsely populated Core world.

Abducted from her shelter and sold into slavery at a young age, Kerlsil had nothing to her name but an ugly stone around her neck, a gift from her late mother who'd been wedded to a brute of a man she was forced to kill during one of his drunken, violent bouts. Her own master had been no better, forcing Eva to flee to the streets. Life was only slightly better there, but Eva still had her arts, though they were meager, and in her predicament, that proved both a blessing and a curse. And she had her loneliness and shame, but these she kept hidden behind a façade of ferrocrete.

The day she discovered that the stone she wore around her neck held the key to burgeoning power, she refused to believe it. It was like an impossible thing, a childish story, a miracle that did not happen in real life, and certainly not hers. She had to test it several times before she'd accept it was true.

Eva Kerlsil's outlook on life changed overnight, and with a renewed sense of strength and purpose, she surreptitiously went about gathering a coalition amongst the dispossessed and destitute, for she had learned to be shrewd and watchful, and she instructed them as to what their role would be in the coming unrest.

When they were in numbers large enough to make a difference, she gave the command, and off they went to do what she told them. These were the invisible in society, the lowest of the low classes, ignored save for when they were being used and abused. So it was that no one took notice of them when, in the dead of night, they slit the throats of nearly all the slavers, constables, and government officials on Stokoryce.

The next morning, when the gruesome discovery was made across the city, Eva Kerlsil went into the city square accompanied by her numerous allies. Once the denizens had gathered, she revealed the truth of the prior night, of the justness of their cause, and of the fact that she was now Supreme Leader of Stokoryce.

Of the still-living constables—those who had not abused their power or forced themselves on women—they were given a choice: support Kerlsil or die. A few tested her and fell dead before the masses. Kerlsil had told no one of the stone's power, and she herself had only learned that the encrusted gem was the Force Crystal of Naga Sadow, which had been a rare, untainted Turag crystal embued with power and augmented by her own. How her mother had come into possession of it was a story she would never learn. All that mattered to her was that she had overcome!

The people grumbled bitterly at this turn of events. They had not particularly loved the prior government, but neither did they wish to see the rule-of-law broken by upstart slaves, prostitutes, and vagrants. But Eva was not interested in their opinion, and any rebellion that she or her people sniffed out was met with swift retribution by her newly appointed Whip Warriors. Yet, as this only served to create a climate of fear in the unhappy populace, militants plotted her overthrow.

It was shortly after these events that she was confronted by the famous Captain Eo and his Space Knights who'd heard of her revolution from Commander Bog of the

Galactic Republic who'd picked up a distress beacon from the captain of a vessel fleeing Stokoryce. The Space Knights were a ragtag band of musicians made up of Hooter, an Elespad; Idy and Ody, a polycephalous, wingless avian known as a Haga; Fuzzball, a metamorphosed Flutter; and the droids, M1-D0M0 and MA-D0M0.

A native Caltinian and popular entertainer, Eo had gathered them in direct response to the speciest Earthlings for Earthlings movement that had raised its ugly head after years of dormancy. After successfully and nonviolently dealing with the EFE, they decided to continue their adventures and bring freedom to the galaxy.

Captain Eo and the Space Knights came unarmed to Supreme Leader Kerlsil's palace. This puzzled her, as did their promise of a gift in exchange for her time. Expecting a trap, Eva prepared her troopers and Whip Warriors. But their gift was almost as hard to believe as the powers of her stone. It was a *musical* performance! The Supreme Leader had no time for such nonsense and would have departed in disdain, but Captain Eo had a rare Force power that engendered feelings of bliss and calm in those towards whom he directed it, and this he channeled through their music.

When their performance ended, she demanded to know what exactly Eo wanted. He said that he only wanted to listen to her account of what happened. That surprised her, but she conceded, and at a meal served later that evening, she explained all that had transpired. When she was finished, he said that he understood and thought he could help find a solution to the peoples' restlessness. To counter her skepticism, he explained that their music had power to bring joy. So while she worked to improve the conditions of the people, which, rather than violence, would endear them to her, he would play free shows, which would give them a measure of comfort and something to look forward to. And if they joined the Republic, Stokoryce would gain additional economic benefits and legitimize her governance.

Five years hence, Eva had married Captain Eo, with whom they had three daughters and one son. Leria, their firstborn, she renamed the world after. Also, there was Melilla, Keri, and Remel, for whom they renamed each of the planet's seas.

Their female offspring and those that followed were born with unusual gifts that allowed them to extend the lives of their husbands by five years—a spell that was sealed during the wedding ceremony and called the *blood kiss*. These women were referred to as Life-Witches at first, but they disliked the name and opted instead for *Life-Bearers*. Their abilities gave them extended life as well, and so long as they provided their gift of *support* to their mates until death, by law, they would inherit the estate and, after a period of recovery, were free to find another husband. Giving *support* to a succession of husbands in this way could prolong their lives for centuries.

To ensure that a dynasty of witches didn't arise to exploit the males of the land, a fear that the people expressed, one of Eva Kerlsil's descendants used the Force Crystal to perform a lengthy ceremony that would prevent future Life-Bearers from having children. This seemed an extreme price to exact, but it was seen as the best alternative to conflict. Life-Bearers would, as per the spell, appear randomly in the populace, which made them highly sought after. Any young women who discovered she was a Life-Bearer would add the sobriquet *Ver* to her name so that the community knew her as such. So was their world forged into a thriving civilization.

SECTION II: THE LIFE AND LEGEND OF LORD NYAX

Before the enchantment was cast that would render Life-Bearers sterile, several women left Leria Kerlsil, not wishing to give up their ability to have children. Ursula Nyax was a young girl when she and her mother, Merlina Cottal, left with little more than the clothes on their backs. She'd not only declined sterilization but refused to extend her abusive husband's life, giving *support* to her child instead.

The two traveled first to their ancestral homeworld of Seidhkona where Ursula learned practices that were unknown on Leria Kerlsil. It was a desolate world, struggling and failing to recover, and no place to bring up a child. So they came to Corellia, where she'd heard that others before her had gone. Once settled, Merlina realized that they'd best not attempt *support* there. The Corellians were tetchy then and leery of the Life-Witches, and so they eked out a living telling fortunes and casting minor spells, careful to move on when local tolerance of them grew thin. She'd heard the grim stories of those who hadn't.

Life grew hard after her mother died and harder still when she got pregnant by a young rogue whose promises she'd foolishly believed. He'd wound up in jail while she ended up with an infant and a reputation that forced her to start over yet again in another town. Ursula was fortunate in that her powers flowed easily through her, enabling her to at least provide shelter and food for herself and her son, Gregor.

Gregor grew up listening to the fabled stories passed down from his grandmother to his mother of the ancient days on Seidhkona where their people had lived as royalty, of the fabulous riches of their forebears, and of the rare and precious gems that flowed like a river out of the Gate of Muspilli, a reward from the Goddess for those brave enough to seek them out at their palaces in the legendary Lands Beyond the Door.

As he grew older, Gregor realized that his mother's stories were little more than Seidhkonan folktales, and he began to think about how he'd survive after she passed, for although she was now making decent credits, enough to put him through school, he didn't see himself walking in her shoes.

During this time, he forsook the normal rites of passage pursued by boys his age in order to acquire the experience he'd need to land a better future. Opportunities on Corellia were plentiful, but for some reason people seemed put off by the young man, and the reputation his mother had as a Life-Witch did not improve their impressions.

Going from one low-paying job to another taught him disdain for people, alien and Human alike, though he went to great pains to hide his contempt, allowing them to imagine him simple. Few ever saw through the disguise. One who did was a S'kytri warrior who had come to Corellia to provide alms for the poor. The blue-skinned Defender employed Gregor's help in carting goods from his ship to designated houses of worship set up to distribute them to needy neighborhoods and encampments.

After aiding the Corellians against would-be Sith occupiers, the Defenders had been granted a post on the third moon of Corellia, a prairie-world called Shadow. It had in the ancient past been terraformed and inhabited by Humans, only to be devastated by war. Then, restored by the Killiks, it was brought into Corellia's orbit.

"Why waste good credits on such lazy and stupid ones as these?" Gregor asked of the Defender. "It'll only discourage them from getting work and benefiting society."

"Who told you that nonsense?" Jak'rii rumbled, turning a scowl on him. Tall, muscular, and powerfully winged, the S'kytri was the single-most intimidating being Gregor had ever encountered, yet as the day wore on, he came to realize that his strength came not from outward signifiers, but rather from some inner component which exuded calm confidence. "You seem *smarter* than that, though you pretend otherwise. These people are not out here because of indolence. Only the greedy tell such lies because they're loath to part with even a fraction of their wealth and seek an excuse to justify their parsimony. Most that we help are sufferers of illness, misfortune, and war. With a bit of help—not only credits but relief programs, benevolent laws, sympathetic neighbors, well-monitored shelters, and time—many of these people will recover their dignity and return to society."

Feeling chagrined, Gregor didn't say anything in response, for he *had* overheard a wealthy and stingy merchant say the very things he'd just uttered, and although his complaints had seemed wise at the time, they sounded foolish and cruel now.

The workload was considerable, and the warrior did not speak much throughout the day, save to ask questions about the boy's life and prattle on about ethical matters. Towards the end of the workday, Gregor got up the nerve to ask Jak'rii about the origins of his people for whom he'd always been curious.

"There are many theories but few who agree," he replied. "Old legends say we were birthed from the Tree of Life; others claim we are related to the Alashan; still others believe we were once a Human tribe, the Orovar of Karathor, before we escaped our canyon valley and mixed with the other peoples of that world. I am no historian. The past does not concern me. We are what we make of ourselves." The S'kytri now gave him his pay, adding a generous bonus. "You have done very well, young Gregor. You should apprentice with me. I sense there's more to you than meets the eye."

"That is very generous…" Gregor stammered, taken aback, "but I cannot just leave Corellia. My mother sacrificed a great deal to put me through school."

"I could teach you things no school can. Not only would you be helping me help people, but you'd be helping your mother as well."

Torn between the magnanimous offer to become part of something larger and fear of so dramatic a change, he stammered, "I… don't know. I can't just start over. Perhaps later, after I've finished school…" While he detested his low status in life, he had drawn comfort from his future plans and couldn't fathom adopting a radically different one.

"You will not be the same person *then* that you are *now*," Jak'rii reasoned. "I know it's daunting, but you have a rare gift, though I wonder if you even know it. Come with me and you will. Stay… and I cannot say what will become of you. The Force tells me that you are at a crossroads—the fork that leads apart from me is a wooded one that winds into deep forest."

"I'm sorry," he told him as he walked away. "I'm just not interested."

Defenders, he later recalled his former employer say, *arrogant, bleeding hearts sticking their noses in everyone's business!* He repeated this to himself several times over the next two days as a way of ameliorating the sinking feeling of having unwisely passed up a rare opportunity until the idea of running off with a S'kytri do-gooder seemed absurd and was promptly forgotten.

In his second year at Kor Vella University, he managed to make friends with a small group of intellectuals who shared what they reckoned to be radical ideas. He put up with their clumsy foibles and youthful experiments with illicit substances due to his feeling that he'd finally found kindred spirits. Their conversations ran from critiques of politics and religion to foolish Corellian cultural practices.

"You don't *really* believe any of that Maker nonsense?" Ard Hichland said to Fon J'Lynn, stabbing at his greasy plate of smoking bantha ribs at their local watering hole, the Dale of Farming. "Religion's just another way to control people."

"And you know that generalization is true, how?" J'Lynn replied, casually sipping a dram of Whyren's Reserve. The son of Hannes J'Lynn, a popular senator from Coronet, Fon J'Lynn seemed to have it all. He was the most promising of them; naturally charming with a hint of the rogue, he'd be the one who'd achieve their oft-discussed goals of rearranging Corellian society for the common folk and not just the upper-classes. His father, of course, had other ideas.

"The professor told us… and it's in the book." Hichland said this as if they were idiots for not realizing an all-too obvious truth. "I think they're just a *little* smarter than us!"

J'Lynn laughed. "So your argument is blind submission to authority. By that logic, we should just let anyone that we presume intelligent do all our thinking for us."

"If they're experts in their field, they've earned the right to make the big decisions," Hichland returned. "That's why they spent years studying and training."

"Except that experts disagree with each other all the time. Besides, study and training don't equate to infallibility. If what they've learned is predicated on a false premise, colored by bias, or hides an agenda, then it's all out the window."

"You just like to see problems where there aren't any."

"If our generation is going to be better than the last, we can't pretend the problems that don't affect us personally aren't there."

"Go to the shanties, and you'll see those problems firsthand," Gregor noted. He'd been milking his Corellian ale for some time now. No one seemed to notice, or if they did, they were too polite to say anything. "Maybe the professor's right, but if we don't question what we're taught, then we're just mirroring old claims. That's how errors become entrenched."

"Well said, Gregor," J'Lynn chimed. "What's the point of an education if not to challenge the status quo? Look at what the *Gazette* said about that woman." He referred to the *Gazette de Coronet*, the largest Corellian newsnet, and the story they'd posted of fifteen-year-old Ethania Eredith beaten to death by local constables for possession of a small amount of spice. The article downplayed the violence while focusing on her father who'd been arrested a decade earlier for smuggling.

"If I keep listening to you two, I'll end up a Lortan Fanatic!" Hichland cried. "Or better yet, I'll join the Sisterhood of the Beatific Countenance!" He made a lewd face. "*That* would at least be worth my time!"

"You'd have to wear a veil," J'Lynn noted. "They don't accept rodders like you!" Everyone laughed.

"Their loss!" Hichland took a large gulp of segir and looked to Gregor. "Hey, didn't you once say your mother does some kind of… I don't know, what did you call it? *Spellcraft* or something?"

Gregor blanched slightly. He didn't like talking about his mother. It wasn't that he was ashamed of her, it was just that her colorful background was something he preferred his friends forget. "It's a type of… fortune-telling, I guess you'd call it."

"Well then, *you* can prove the professor wrong!" Hichland pressed.

"I suspect there's a bidirectional relationship between magic and science that they prefer to ignore," J'Lynn said, his eyes kindling in curiosity. "They don't like things they can't easily categorize."

"Or maybe it's because it's just not *real*," Hichland insisted. Then, turning to Gregor: "But *you* say it is. You've seen it. So show us."

Taken aback, he stammered, "She's the practitioner, *not* me." Gregor hoped that that would be the end of it. But, of course, it wasn't. He finished his ale before realizing what he'd done. He debated purchasing another or feigning to have homework and leave early, but if he did, it would look like he was running away.

"You're the one who wants to make me a believer," Hichland prodded. "The burden of proof is on you to establish the facts."

"Have you noticed that people who say that never *actually* want it?" interjected J'Lynn.

"I *never* said I cared what you believe, just that you're a closed-minded clod with a chip on your shoulder mired in conformist, conventional dogma."

J'Lynn and Hichland laughed uproariously at this, but Gregor regretted saying it, knowing for certain that Hichland wouldn't leave him alone now.

"And *you're* a fraud!" Hichland said with a grin. "If you can't prove it, take it back. Tell me I'm right."

"Gentlemen, please," J'Lynn interrupted. "Gregor, as much as I hate to agree with Ard—who truly *is* a clod—I'm quite interested. Maybe your mother can show us a few things."

"No…" But they wouldn't stop looking at him with anticipation. In the end, his desire to not lose their respect won out. "Fine," he said after a minute. "I'll *see* if there's a few things she can show me. But I make no promises."

It took a few days to get around to asking her, but she readily obliged, reminding him that as a child he often displayed natural talent. She didn't much care for the fact that he was doing it to win some argument with his friends, but she knew how young men were and reasoned that he'd grow out of the need to prove himself.

Gregor hadn't remembered using the gift as a child, but he surprised himself by demonstrating proficiency in a short time. After practicing several simple enchant-

ments that he could replicate reasonably well without embarrassing himself, he led his friends to a lonely creek not far from university grounds.

From the first demonstration, J'Lynn's jaw dropped in amazement. Gregor was surprised by how much that pleased him. As for Hichland, he examined every angle he could think of to ensure it wasn't an elaborate trick before he finally conceded that he'd been wrong. That pleased Gregor even more.

After that, Gregor continued to develop his skills. It turned out to be the one area in which he excelled. He knew he was smart, but maintaining good grades took considerable work and was stultifyingly dull. He was not particularly handsome, amusing, or likable to the opposite sex, who more often than not rebuffed him, though he took solace in the fact that his companions were not much better in that area than he, save for J'Lynn, of course. But here was something that came naturally to him, that distinguished him. He was surprised he'd dismissed it for so long.

After graduation, however, life soured in the ways that it does for some, but Gregor took it harder than most. Hichland became the businessman he'd always aspired to be, marrying a self-absorbed woman that chattered like a Squib and popped out a bevy of fat and complacent children. Other friends followed similar trajectories. As to Fon J'Lynn, he turned out to be the biggest disappointment, squandering his intellect and betraying his ideals to follow the path laid out by his father—an arranged marriage to an attractive and accomplished daughter of a wealthy industrialist, a political career, and a new set of friends who were deemed more "suitable" for his image, which was itself altered to fit into the circles he now walked. Unable to make the transition that they had, Gregor was again out in the cold, little more than the disagreeable, bourgeois son of a witch from some Maker-forsaken world.

Gregor's employment at Kor Vella Financing paid well but was soul sucking in its dreariness, and with each day that passed, he felt only more hollow and disconnected from reality. His mother, who'd grown increasingly ill over the past few months, failed to respond to the herbs and treatments that healed so many others. Eventually, she succumbed and died. Her funeral was attended by what few friends she'd made over the years along with a smattering of regular clients. His own friends were likely unaware that she'd passed. He didn't bother telling them, and they didn't show.

Ursula had been Gregor's one tether to the world. Without her comforting presence and sage advice, he grew enervated and embittered. He quit his job, ostensibly to mourn, but it was just an excuse. He spent his days brooding. His erstwhile friends he now saw as hypocrites and Corellian society as coercive force grooming its youth to conform to a prefabricated society and wear its requisite masks.

If society is false, so must be its standards, he reasoned. *So too all my foolish ideals and dreams*. He withdrew more deeply into his books, but they couldn't offer the same solace they once had. Finally, he declared in his heart that he would discard all of the social fictions he'd bought into. He had something *they* didn't, and that made *him* superior. With his inheritance he could get by financially by working the spells he'd learned from his mother before her passing, but in his current state, he questioned this path too. His anthropology classes claimed that magic was little more

than psychological manipulation with some texts acknowledging the influence of little-understood scientific principles. Even Fon J'Lynn had said as much.

Such were his thoughts when he ambled into a musty old bookshop in the neighboring city of Morabelle that he'd visited several times in the past. It was owned by an exceedingly rude and demanding man named Tishler Amnon—whom Gregor often fantasized about throttling. The odious owner ignored his customers when they entered, and Gregor had learned to return the favor. The shop was characteristically empty of people, allowing him space to meander through the cramped corridors and dusty alcoves. Amnon was not himself a collector and had priced his wares according to his whims. His barely organized sections were often filled with piles of books he never got around to placing on shelves, most of which were overcrowded and double-stacked anyway. Gregor didn't care. Part of him liked the disarray. It allowed him to imagine coming upon something truly unique, though most of the time it just meant spending hours wading through junk. But not this day.

On this day, something was with him. He could feel it the moment he spotted it. He was drawn to a particular stack within which he pulled out an odd-looking book, peculiar in its heavy weathering, with a cracked black cover marked only by an unknown but intriguing symbol. He felt a kind of current upon touching it, which caused him to look around to see if anyone else was watching. Chalking it up to an overactive imagination, he opened it, perusing carefully its yellowed pages. Copious were its disturbing drawings of a coarse and ghastly nature, while its text was scrawled in strange characters from some unknown and forgotten tongue. Yet, the more he looked at them, the more it seemed as if he could make out the words, a thing that ought not to have been possible. He looked harder. There were spells and there were *spells*. If the book was authentic, what it purported to offer were powers beyond the paltry divining his mother did for jealous wives and bereaved clients. These rites were of the kind folk considered grossly immoral and certainly unlawful.

Gregor knew there and then that he must have it at whatever the cost.

He put on his most casual face and proceeded to the register to haggle with the unpleasant proprietor. An ever-suspicious man, he had the uncanny ability to sense when others really wanted something. He may not have read books, but he read people like a savant. By the end, Gregor agreed to pay what amounted to a year's wages. Amnon made a snort that indicated he didn't believe he could afford it, but the look on his face when Gregor returned two hours hence with the total sum was satisfying.

If this actually works, Gregor thought as he carried his prize out of the shop, *I will gain greater satisfaction than* that*!*

With great haste, Gregor returned home, shuttering the windows so as to ensure that he wouldn't be disturbed, not that anyone bothered to come over now that his mother was dead. He turned the lamp to its full brightness and planted himself at his desk. The book's title was *To Conquer a Life of Illness and Dark Dreams*. It was credited to one Etka Chu, a Sith wizard who'd lived on Alpheridies and taken over from Supreme Malevolence J'deo upon his demise. Chu was not a well-known Sith, preferring instead the acquisition and preservation of lost knowledge from ages past.

As per Chu's introduction, the work was an extrapolation from various manuscripts ancient beyond time and forbidden to all but the most dedicated of devotees: "Those who Follow to the Letter these Formulae will attain Greatness above the Ugly and Mundane Worlds of Blind Sentients Risen from the Mud and Blood of the Gods to Serve their Betters…." Gregor took a deep breath.

He mustn't get his hopes up. It was unwise to depend on the manuscript's authenticity, which was more than unlikely to be true, and even if it was… he wasn't certain he had the temerity to do what it asked.

As it turned out, the first spell was also his only option. As if the book itself was testing his worthiness, all of the other incantations were occluded in that ancient, coded script that he was now unable to decipher. But this invultuation asked for the unthinkable. Gregor slammed the book shut and stormed away in frustration.

This is nonsense, absurdity, madness even! He knew he wouldn't sleep that night, and he didn't. The following day, he returned to the book and memorized the necessary things he would need to attain success. The next step would prove the hardest.

All who died in the Corellian system were buried on Sacorria's moon, Sarcophagus, appropriately called the Dead Moon. His mother was amongst those who'd been interred there. Now he steeled himself to do something not merely taboo but abominable. Were he to fail, or if the book proved fake, he'd have to live with the ignominy of the act and forsake all hope of achieving anything above the herd.

Visitors to Sarcophagus were common enough. He blended in with the passengers but kept enough distance that he didn't have to speak to anyone. It didn't take much to stay behind when the shuttle left. That night, in cold, damp desolation amidst the hallowed dirt of the grave and tears of self-recrimination, he dug up the coffin within which lay the decaying frame of his mother. How much smaller she looked than he'd remembered… He wept, offered up penitence, and nearly turned back. He knew he should just burn the iniquitous tome. Instead, he read aloud its blasphemous words.

From his mother's rigored corpse were croaked the forgotten secrets of the ancients—secrets that would lead him to the deepest, lightless realms of mental and infernal space. But rather than feel fear, he felt elated. *So the book is real!*

He returned home the next day on the morning shuttle, thinking the whole time that his heinous act of the night before meant he would lose his soul. How he wished now that Ard Hichland had been right and that there was no such thing. *What good has my soul ever done me anyway?* Etka Chu had made it clear that this was the price of preeminence. That's why it had to be the corpse of a loved one and not just a stranger. And, as he reasoned on it, he thought, *Hadn't my friends done something just as vulgar when they sold out their ideals for wealth and privilege? All of which was denied me by virtue of not coming from the right family!*

The rewards for his act of depravity were great. Gregor rapidly rose to wealth and relocated to the burgeoning, bustling metropolis of Coronet City which was fast being transformed into a baronial enterprise of auriphrygiate design, texture, and taste. Already filigreed poems were being recited and baroque songs were being sung in reverence to it. One of the more famous that Gregor found amusing was this:

Coronet City, incarnadine dream of the Hesperian Queen and her sighing subjects,
resplendent in damascene; until the sparkling dawn, thy golden children roam on;
Coronet City, land of the amaranth and roaring aesthete, the charming sybarite;
fixed in perpetuity thy autumnal myth in neverending solstice of everlasting bliss;
Coronet City, astride the beryl sea, the shining capital atop the hill, carefree;
eternally is blessed thy ne'er to be forgotten Flame of the West;
Coronet City, beloved province of all love's deities, repelled by the rivals of gaiety;
protected from afar, thy glorious creatures, the roving wing'd stars…

In a year's time, Gregor re-established himself as Lord Nyax, Apothecary and Wizard to the People. His abilities brought him the respect and wealth he'd always craved, but these now no longer mattered much to him, save for how it afforded him the pretense of eccentric gentry. Lord Nyax was now one of the many charms of the Jewel of Corellia, charms that in their prime, with their translunary splendor and mystic immanence promising nothing short of undying rhapsody, were lost on him. Or so he'd thought.

To Conquer… had said there would be tests to his resolve on the path to greatness, and this test was perhaps even more difficult than his first. It is said that, "Men may overcome terror and revulsion, but few can forfend the taste of temptation."

Coronet City was bursting with life and love. The wave of melancholy that had earlier crested over him, threatening to prison him in its enervating depths, was nearly entirely dispelled in the face of all that freedom, wealth, and pleasure can bestow upon one whose never before experienced it. How much easier it would be if he had the ennui and cold disdain for "the fake world" that Etka Chu had.

Gregor came close to succumbing to that which people called a "happy life" when love came knocking at his door. Were it not for the grievous heartbreak that followed, things would have gone very differently than they did. Much later, he wondered if the unseen powers hadn't arranged it to ensure his dedication and focus…

As it was, disquietude and despair restored him to the path he'd previously embarked on, and once again he found that the runes in *To Conquer…* were closed to him, save for one that required yet another egregious act. Perhaps it was because he'd been away from it for so long that it seemed a thing of such heinousness that even he, in all his bitter misery and hunger for power, shuddered. *But to have gone so far already…*

Within the confines of his castle, earlier designed on esoteric formulae by builders accustomed to the whimsy and eccentricity of rich Corellians, he railed against Etka Chu. *Why must I be so accursed? What have I done to have suffered so? Why must you ask this horror of me, one who has only ever wanted to help those worse off?*

No voice answered. No sign was given. He crouched in utter darkness, astonished at the grievous thing he was now considering. *No!* He decided. *It was a step too far.*

The vagrant who knocked on his door could not have been more pathetic. He bore a haunted look that spoke of long years of misery, attested to by missing teeth and skin taut over protruding bones. *There but for the Mercy of the Maker go I*, Nyax

thought. "Come inside. I shall provide you food and warmth on this cold night," he said, wondering at how he had even allowed himself to think of doing harm to one such as this. Empowerment or no, he was no murderer.

But when Gregor turned to lead him into the dining room, he felt a sense of danger and spun around. Seeing the vagrant's outraised blade and cruel expression, something changed within Gregor and the light in his eyes died. *So this is the way of the worlds! At last, I have learned my lesson*. He said these things to himself even as he wrestled the knife away from the surprisingly strong man and stabbed him several times with it until the stinking, twitching body ceased to move. With haste bordering on panic, he dragged it to the basement and returned to clean up. So was the die cast.

Progress commenced with his nocturnal wanderings in the shanties, disguised in drab garments and with a potent charm that rendered him near-indistinguishable from the hardscrabble that stained the stinking back-alleys and meandering out-of-the-way lanes. He took the lost and left-behind, widows, orphans, and others down on their luck who rummaged about looking for shelter or alms. Murder did not come naturally to him, and he wept the first few times he did it, cursing himself and the circumstances that led him down this path. These were not proud or pleasurable moments, save for one—the owner of a certain bookshop—but he convinced himself that his cruelty would serve a greater purpose and proceeded through the caliginous rites laid out by Etka Chu whose writings he could now clearly read.

He summoned predatory creatures from some hellscape he'd never imagined that he set loose in the underground Selonian Tunnels and sprawling Forests of Drall, where they would hide, feed, and wait, with some coming to seek prey in Kor Vella. He procured servants from the corpses of those he killed or newly disinterred. He practiced *derriph midwan*, gormandizing himself on the pain and sorrow-filled ambrosia of the life-force he siphoned from his captives, gaining strength both mental and physical for an even greater project: the building of the Chamber of Bones.

In this underground vault he erected the Jade Door, surrounding it with an eldritch Strix symbol built of maize and the spilling of much blood; it would serve for his journey, his Black Pilgrimage. This was the last of the invidious incantations in the book and the one that would reveal the truth behind the darkest folktales of old.

With excitement and no small amount of trepidation, he stepped through the lintel. He returned after what had seemed like years but was but a mere few days… and he was no longer the same man. All past things were discarded like so much dross; whatever loves, hopes, desires, fears, and things he'd agonized over had been eradicated along with his flesh. For the purpose of public appearances, he employed the dark arts to shape for himself a flesh mask that resembled a version of his former self.

Some time later, the authorities began to take notice of the missing vagrants after reports were made by concerned friends and families. The constables had no leads and little hope of finding any of them, but as one witness came forward claiming to have seen one of the lost children wandering near the castle of Lord Nyax, they came to make inquiries.

Lord Nyax remarked that he used to frequently open his home to the community, but he rarely entertained of late due to a mild but trying bout of cholera. Heartened by his solicitude and the assurance of funds to aid in the investigation, the constables reported word of Lord Nyax's generosity to the ears of the Presidential Palace of Coronet City, which was now headed by President Fon J'Lynn. Surprised to hear the name of an old friend from his youth, J'Lynn took it upon himself to see if it was in fact the same man and visit him in person.

Fon J'Lynn was met at the door by one of Nyax's servants who had been amongst the living recently enough to pass as *normal* if not quite *whole*. J'Lynn thought it a kindness on Nyax's part to have hired the mentally challenged, though he questioned the wisdom of it when upon entering the castle, he immediately picked up the strong stench of perfume masking some foul odor. But when Gregor descended the spiral stairs, it was with such cheerful welcome and warm congratulations that J'Lynn put any unpleasant notions out of his mind and commed his bodyguards to take the night. Clearly embarrassed, Lord Nyax explained that the odor was the unfortunate result of his beloved servant's recent illness and their poor attempts to conceal it.

Lord Nyax led him to a seat in the dining hall, asking after J'Lynn's family, political career, and old friends; all the while the wait staff continually supplied an abundance of food and wine. Indeed, the dining hall bore no trace of the earlier odor and, bathed as it was in the warm glow of candlelight and mouthwatering aroma of exquisite fare, the two men soon fell into easy laughter, robust dialogue, and more sobering topics like the passing of Fon's father and the nostalgia of former days.

When J'Lynn finally gathered the nerve to ask as to Lord Nyax's acquisition of wealth, his friend was only too pleased to tell him: "You remember the old parlor tricks I used to perform for you and Ard?" J'Lynn nodded, remembering all too well. It had never settled well with him that Gregor had continued to pursue it after that, and though J'Lynn chalked up magic to some unknown material cause, he recalled that it had unsettled him enough to have stopped associating with Gregor after graduation. "How often we used to daydream of utilizing the sciences to propel us to greatness. Well, I discovered it, Fon! And it's made me quite rich! It's all rather abstruse and I won't bore you with the details, save to repeat that old maxim we once were so fond of saying: 'Progress is the future borne from the past!'"

Nyax moved on to other topics, for which J'Lynn was grateful. Whatever "science" his old friend had discovered was not something he was interested in understanding, though he was glad Gregor had found some way to elevate his station, if for no other reason that it assuaged his guilt at having all but abandoned him.

When, at last, J'Lynn had grown quite drunk and barely able to stand, he apologized for his lack of self-control and bid Gregor *adieu*.

"I will call for a carriage," Lord Nyax promised, seemingly unaffected by the copious amounts of wine he'd consumed, "and while we wait, allow me to be a proper host and give you a tour!" With an inscrutable smile, Nyax led him through the impressive castle, finally leading him to a passage that wound down to the basement. "My most *interesting* treasures, however, are kept down here!"

The lighting grew considerably dimmer as they proceeded down the long, stone steps. Something about the cold, crypt-like vault made J'Lynn feel uneasy. He did not want to seem nervous by voicing objection, save to mention a need for haste due to the "lateness of the hour." But Gregor only laughed.

An unmistakable and hideous bouquet of death assailed his nostrils then, and he recalled that this is what he'd smelled from the servant earlier. He grew nauseous and not a little frightened, knowing he must be in close proximity to dead matter for such an odor to be so intense. "I think you'll be impressed," Lord Nyax said from the dark.

J'Lynn appeared to be in a large circular chamber. Three apertures traveled down to unknown pitch cavities. Within the chamber's center, an ornate brazier burned a low flame, barely illuminating the dozens of pale Human-sized sculptures that stood at intervals around it. J'Lynn assumed these to be precious works of art, but it was too dark to make out any details… and yet there was something horrible and grotesque about them. Coupled with the noxious odor, evil suppositions began to take hold, and in a moment, as his eyes adjusted, he realized to his dismay that the *sculptures* were not sculptures at all but people standing unnaturally still!

"Perhaps a bit more light!" Nyax said, waving a hand that caused the flame to burst brightly.

These were no people… not any longer! And strewn about the walls and floor was the stomach-churning residue of their anthropophagic habits. "Do you like my exanimate army? Though I suppose they are quite animated when I command them. They are the ultimate expression of betrayed ideals," he said caustically from behind J'Lynn. "I'm afraid the smell is quite terrible in closed quarters." At a gesture from their master, the grisly dead things shuffled silently towards him. A door sealed shut above, leaving J'Lynn alone with them in the shadows.

When it was learned that the President hadn't returned home that evening, his bodyguards arrived with the authorities to Lord Nyax's castle early the next day to inquire. The front castle door was ajar, and upon entering they found the rooms empty save for an unwholesome odor. Finally, they descended into the dark cellar.

Thinking perhaps that some accident had befallen J'Lynn and his host, they turned on their torches and split up to explore the passages. That which they saw in those chambers, including a strange freestanding, jade-colored door, unsettled them, but turning back they found themselves lost in the winding tunnels. That wasn't possible.

The sound of shuffling did little to comfort them. When their torches failed, revealing a darkness filled with glowing pale orbs, terror took hold of their senses!

Their screams were soon muffled by the shuffling of many shapes that chomped and tore, and soon enough the constables rose up again to join their numbers.

At his signal, Lord Nyax sent his septic army forth. Now in the hundreds, they shuffled to the homes and workplaces of his chosen targets. So too were the beasts called up from the shadows where they'd lain in wait to join in the feast.

With a shaken J'Lynn in tow, Lord Nyax strode amidst these involitient forces to reach the top floor of the Presidential Palace of Coronet City—*now the Palace of Lord Nyax!* With his black cowl barely shadowing his flesh mask, he stalked through the

corridors; his execrations killing or incapacitating any guards and otherwise brave personnel who tried to stop him.

The communications room existed to broadcast official announcements to the citizens of Corellia. Nyax had promised him that a public announcement of his abdication of Corellia to him would spare the death of millions. "Do it!" Lord Nyax commanded. Seeing as his options were limited, J'Lynn complied.

"After I've done what you asked, you'll withdraw your forces?"

Lord Nyax chuckled at that notion. "I am not so naïve as that! Until my authority is seen as legitimate, the threat of force is always required… as it will be afterwards when opponents seek to take it. I'm afraid my servants will remain to ensure a *peaceful* transition of power…"

"How did you become like this? You were never interested in power when we were in school. We used to speak of an egalitarian society—not *this*!"

"Is that what *you've* created?" Lord Nyax spat derisively. "You dare to judge *me!* Of anyone on Corellia, *you* could have eliminated this world's suffering and poverty, but did you? No! You merely followed in your corrupt father's footsteps. Did you know he was one of my first energumen? Oh yes, it was *his* rotting corpse you smelled when first you entered my home. I had him hide in an adjacent room. I didn't want you to get unduly disturbed."

"You lie! My father died of a coronary attack. I watched him interred on the Dead Moon!"

"Where I *disinterred* him and brought him back to life… or a *semblance* of life, anyway. You've seen my progeny… and unlike you and your kind, I have never lied!"

"*Why*? Why are you doing this?"

"Open a channel and announce your abdication to the telescreen. Then, you will hear along with my citizens what their new sovereign has to say."

Fraught with anguish, exhaustion, and no small fright, J'Lynn obeyed.

J'Lynn was made to give a short and pained statement. When it was done, Lord Nyax stood tall before the projector. "Citizens of Corellia: I am Lord Nyax, your new sovereign!" Though he could not hear it, he well imagined the gasp of the citizenry. "For years you have lived half-lives built upon a fabricated society propped up by the wealthy, ruling elite. While your poor huddle in frozen antechambers, half-starved and forced to work to the bone, their fat landlords and overseers profit from their misery. *No more!* I have set loose my loyal soldiers and beasts to rid you of such oppressors—an army of perversions for the perverse! I will strip bare all the falsehoods of this world so that there is no class distinction any longer. Rise up with my forces; do not let their countenances make you afraid, for that is but a demonstration of the power I wield, a power that will be used to bring forth a society you deserve." After a pause, he continued, "To those who fight against us, who seek to perpetuate this deceitful and cruel society: know that death and horror await you… here and in the worlds beyond!"

The voice of Lord Nyax shifted subtly, turning inwards and taciturn as if he were speaking to himself, and his words were such that those who'd heard him that day never forgot them. "I have peered into those blasted worlds, worlds that are perpetually hidden from our sight. One cannot begin to imagine that when you bury your

dead, their spirits travel to these realms! I have seen it… but ever there comes a price for knowledge, even though we hide from it, content in our pursuits and amusements. Beyond the Door, *they* are there—the malevolent, ever-esurient ones, churning in the Abyss, reigning over the Nine Hells of the Outer Darkness!

"Through weird parhelia and alarming penumbra I alighted upon a garden of worldly delights, a seeming feast for the senses, only to find it was but a roiling mass of viscera and unspeakable putrescence! Next, I saw this world in its *true* form, decaying and rotten, its people maddened by guilt and forced to replay their horrid lives as puppets in a nightmare show! I flew past a sunless plane of neverending ice and mist where never is another soul encountered but suffers alone in eternal abandonment. Beyond massive and menacing gates, I saw a triumvirate overseeing the endless tortures of the betrayers, predators, prevaricators, and charlatans in pits of excrement and burning flesh; then, in the descending, depraved levels of Diyu the banished Yama Kings known as the Noo roil and harrow in glee. I passed the realm of the evil dead gods, and in the end, when there was nothing left of me but my bones and blackened spirit, I was hurled across death's freezing divide to the fiery darkness of Duodel, the bottomless dark where the damned are hunted, disemboweled, and eaten alive over and again… This is but a glimpse of the horrors I saw that await the unjust! For this reason, I urge you to rise up and overthrow the tyrants that have kept you down for so long! Smash them! Stab them! Kill them in whatever ways you can, and we will rebuild this world anew!"

While Lord Nyax was terrifying the stunned populace with a tale of horror they'd pass down from generation to generation, J'Lynn depressed a hidden code used to contact the Defenders who dwelt on Shadow. When Nyax had finished and the projector was silenced, J'Lynn turned to him. "You speak of such things as if you are not a monster yourself. Shouldn't they know your soldiers are but murdered innocents?"

"There are *few* innocents in this world, Fon. And to deal with the monstrous, one must become a monster." It was said softly, almost regretfully. "*That* is my sacrifice."

"I don't believe a word you say," he retorted defiantly, "not of the state of this world, nor of the one to come!"

Lord Nyax laughed. "You do not see what you do not wish to see. But I have seen! You think such things irrational, that your Celestials could never build such realms. Yet these hollows were adorned not by them, but by the actions of *people* while yet they live and breathe. So are your spirits drawn to that which you knew in life—darkness to darkness! Do you not see the suffering you inflict on each other in the name of credits, control, and pleasure? The horrors you visit upon the beasts? *Our torments in Hell are well-deserved!* Let me show you!"

In that moment, for but a few seconds, Lord Nyax removed the false mask he'd created, displaying a face that looked more like a decayed cabbage left too long in the field, with craters for eyes that burned with unnatural fires within. The former president could only shudder at the thought that what Gregor said might be true.

"I suppose I should thank you, for in your betrayal I learned this terrible truth… but the fact is that I hate you for it!" With that, Nyax stretched out his arms and unleashed a torrent of electrokinetic energy, sizzling J'Lynn's screaming flesh.

It was then that *he* burst in, tall, muscular, and winged with cobalt skin and a flaming blade in hand. He'd already been on Corellia, having heard accounts of strange doings and violent attacks. The broadcast brought him to the palace.

Gregor Nyax stood as one stunned. He had not seen or thought of the brave S'kytri in all these years. It seemed like the life of another man. He appeared hale and vibrant as ever. A flicker of doubt crossed Nyax's mind as he thought of what his life might have been had he taken Jak'rii up on his offer all those years ago.

Recognition caused the S'kytri's face to drop in regret and then just as quickly harden in resolve, assured that the horrors he'd seen could only have come from one suffused in deepest darkness. "Are you responsible for all this?"

"Indeed. I have done what needed doing. Your kind cannot understand, putting salves on minor wounds while the world gushes rivers of blood!"

"We can discuss all that when you are in custody. Will you now submit to me?"

"*I* am the only authority on this planet! And I will never submit to you or any other!"

Knowing all he needed to know, Jak'rii wasted no further time with words. He swung. Nyax's severed head flew off his body, which crumpled to the ground like a rotted tree. The S'kytri then put his sword to the hideous remains which instantly lit up in flames.

Without their master, Nyax's army—yet engaged in fighting the Defenders or rending apart those who formerly held power on Corellia—fell at that moment, while the beasts retreated back to the shadows of the forests and underground tunnels.

"I need to denounce what he said," Fon J'Lynn croaked, "reassure people."

"You're in no condition, I'm afraid," Jak'rii stated. "Moreover, I think the people have been coddled enough. With your permission..." J'Lynn nodded wearily in response. Jak'rii broadcast the following brief message: "To the citizens of Corellia: Lord Nyax has been defeated. The fog has lifted… for now. Many of the powerful of Corellia have been killed, but President J'Lynn survives and will resume office after a period of rest… I knew Nyax when he was but a young man. He did not begin life this way… and though his methods were abominable, there is some truth to what he said. If Corellian society is not to fall like so many worlds before it, you would do well to remember this: you can cling to what you knew and restore a corrupted system, or you can change things for the better while you yet have the chance. Our people will stay for a time to maintain peace until order is reestablished, but we will not rule; neither will we prop back up what was torn down."

He turned to J'Lynn, who nodded soberly. "I will do what I can to see that Corellia becomes better than it was."

And to his credit, Corellia did improve for a time.

Sarcophagus was then forbidden to offworlders for burials and legends began to spread. It was said that Lord Nyax yet travels the Nine Hells and returns on Hallowe'en as a revenant. Mothers tell their misbehaving children that his ghost roams the streets searching for lost younglings to devour, and some swear that his black shadow haunts the necropolis on the Dead Moon. Others swear that he is the one who escorts the wicked dead to the Gates of Hell!

But most say these are only stories…

CHAPTER EIGHTY

VERNAL TALES FROM THE ENDOR MOON

THE WITCH OF ENDOR

By the time Lindronnigen was found again, after a crashing ship scorched a trail through the Forest of Thorns two hundred years before the Battle of Yavin, the inhabitants of Lesser Tana—now simply called Endor—regarded the Vassal Queen of the Night Spirit as just one of their many legends.

It took no small effort, but Mynyd the Rock Wizard managed to melt the frozen prism of the Vassal Queen of the Night Spirit, awakening her from a long slumber and secreting her away to his fortress where he nursed her back to health with all manner of charms and healing herbs.

Although her memories had vanished, the form she'd unconsciously taken was that of Lindronnigen. When she inquired as to who she was, Mynyd told her the truth as far as he knew it: "You were once a great being who'd come to prepare Lesser Tana for the coming of your mother, the Night Spirit. You were opposed and defeated by the Monitors and Protectors of Tana. All of this was a *very* long time ago."

"I have no memory of such things," she wondered aloud. "Why is that?"

"You were frozen for millennia."

"*Millennia*?!" She felt dizzy and dislocated from reality. "Impossible. How are *you* alive? And why, after all this time, did you revive me?"

"The Vaathkree are a long-lived race, but I am a wizard and live longer still!" Then more whistfully he added. "My time is nearly at an end, and no extensions will avail me. And though I have lived long, I resent the coming of death! Spring and youth irritate me beyond measure. Perhaps that is but the impending darkness corrupting my heart and mind. Be that as it may, once, long ago, you did me a great favor. When at last your hidden location was revealed, I set about to repay that debt."

"I am grateful," she returned hesitantly, wondering at the strangeness of this wizard, "though I cannot fathom what I am supposed to do with myself now."

"You have not asked for my counsel, but I will give it, nonetheless. Do as I have done… *forget the past*. You are a queen. Rule what lesser races will have you."

"I feel as if I was intended for more," she replied. "What was I once called?"

"I would not advise you to use your former name, nor even the shape of Lindronnigen, for these might be recalled by the Monitors who still visit these parts…" Thinking a moment, he added. "Call yourself Morag, for that is a shortened form of your true name as you once told it to me long ago. Here…" He rummaged through a chest, pulling out a staff and handing it to her. "I procured it from Tamand traders who sometimes visit these parts. They did not know its value… Do you recognize it?"

"This belonged to me…"

"Your ancestral staff may help your memory return. It cannot be destroyed by mere age or accident. It will also aid you with your spellcraft. We can practice now."

With Mynyd's magical instructions and the power of her staff, Morag regained enough of her inherent abilities to begin anew.

Taking on the form of a harmless Amaran enchantress, she built a new hut not far from the Forest of Thorns where for several years she laid low, struggling to retrieve her power and memories, the latter of which made her frustrated but also gave her a renewed sense of purpose. Then, one day, she recalled that she'd had a husband. But not even the Rock Wizard's skills could help her find him, discerning only this: "Stagorr and the Ice Demons were enchanted not by a spell but by the Season Scepter wielded by the demigod known as the Snow King, who is powerful and best avoided. Your daughter, Odra, yet lives, though I fear you will not find much welcome from her."

She'd forgotten she had a daughter, and the rest was so baffling she had Mynyd repeat it several times before concluding that she would have to find her family.

For long years, Morag sought out news of the concealed place of Stagorr, all the while taking great pains to re-establish dominion over the brood of her ancient allies, some of which still dwelt on the moon. But as she discovered when she summoned the Kreegon—only to come upon a crumbling skeleton that had been preserved in Bunyip Bog—not all of her servants had. Of those who yet had progeny, many did not wish to serve this stranger, and Morag's abilities were not what they once were. When the vicious Rakazzak beasts first responded to the call, they retreated again, fearful of this odd being who had the power to beckon them.

But Morag was determined to regain her full strength and soon began to raise up a fortress in Mount Thunderstone. Knowing that she could not simply force her will upon the inhabitants of this world, she would have to go about things as she now remembered Lindronnigen had done. It had been through charm and guile that she'd first secured Stagorr to her side; now, with artifice and cunning, she'd convert the Protectors of Tana to the service of the Night Spirit.

THE QUORK AND THE MANTIGRUE

During this time, Morag learned that the Quorks, Bobogs, and Jotnar had already fallen to the shadow. These races should have readily bowed the knee to her, but as of yet, her overtures had been rejected. Mynyd had no dealings with them either. So she set about to unravel what had transpired in the centuries since her long slumber and whether she had rival powers with which she'd have to contend.

A simple spell had Ragland Nowes talking. Quork history was long and involved much resentment and quarrels with the nations that had forged with them the Spell of the Seven Oaths. But after too many battles and conflicts with forces both external and internal, their cultural outlook had changed. It was during that period that they'd become the companions of the Dragon Birds, having saved each other's lives in one grueling adventure. "Who are these Dragon Birds that you speak of?"

"Other peoples call them by other names. They are Devil Beasts to some of the tribes they raid and Devil Birds to others. In the north, they are called Condor Dragons."

She narrowed her eyes at a memory. "What do they call *themselves*?"

"Few can speak their tongue," Nowes replied, "but they regard themselves as Mantigrues. Do not think to poach ours! You may find the matriarch in her nest, there…"

He pointed in the direction of the Molten Mountains to the east.

Morag hastened for their aerie. Several Mantigrues had come with her in ages past to dwell on the moon of Endor. It would mean certain death if they had forgotten the Daughter of Thargorograht. As she drew near to the nest, the great matriarch swooped down upon her. Morag held her ground, refusing to show fear.

"It was prophesied that you would one day return," the Mantigrue matriarch said to her in the language of old. In the distance, her fledglings stood erect and alert to see what this odd business was about and whether or not it would result in a meal. "From generation to generation have we passed down to our offspring the word of the coming of the rightful Queen of Endor."

"Ever were the Mantigrue faithful to Thargorograht!" Morag replied in the old tongue, pleased to know that there were yet some who remembered her.

"She was the Great Queen of the Night, but you are Moragarom, rightful heir to these lands. I shall see to it that the Quorks serve *you*."

"By what name are you known?"

"I am known as Chrysophilea, though none have used my name in long years, for few of the Quorks can understand us."

"There is much I would learn of this world and several races that I would visit. When your fledglings have grown old enough to fend for themselves, come to me at Mount Thunderstone and cry out. I shall hear and join you there."

"It shall be as you command!" Chrysophilea replied. "We shall soar the heights together, and over the verdure hills and ripe fields, and beyond the formidable forests, you shall have dominion like it was said in the days of old!"

THE BOBOG AND THE PHLOG

With the giant Bobog, she was less impressed. But as she came to discover, their history revealed more to the story than first met the eye. During the Cosmic Wars, the Bobog had done much good in the defense of Lesser Tana, most notably in their impressive defeat of Hershoon the Destroyer who'd come to swallow the peoples of their world. In recent centuries, however, the Bobog were known to be churlish and hostile, a scattered, onerous remnant that had been decimated by the Phlogs.

The mixed races of Phlogs were not indigenous to Lesser Tana, and although tall and strong, they had not been the enormous giants they later became. They were known beforehand as the Phlor, and because of their natural strength and mild tempers, they were a target of slavers. Circa 1100 BBY, a sizable group were abducted from their home moons of Phlors Rex and Phlors Regina and placed on the ship of the T'surr Slavemaster Zephyrus. They would find freedom again when his ship crashed near the Great Sandy Waste of Simoon, releasing also the dangerous swamp-lions, thorn cats, and brontomex into the wild. The Phlors were rescued by the Bobog, who were the designated protectors of that region. After killing the vicious Zephyrus and

his band, they offered the Phlors a home close to theirs in Bobog Burg, and for years they had fellowship and peace.

But all that was good would give way to madness and war when King Og began to make unreasonable demands of his people and neighbors. Sensing the odd change in their Bobog ally, the Ewoks in the nearby Forest of Simoon sent a delegation to speak with King Og, but the jealous giant told them to mind their own business.

Unbeknownst to all, King Og jealously guarded a source of great power, an object known as the Masbat Shard, which he had fashioned into a ring that he now wore constantly on his left hand. His changed demeanor was due to that very shard which had the power to speak astonishing things into the mind of the one who wielded it.

Evil inevitably came of those who heard its voice and saw its visions, and before long, the royal court became unhinged. King Og then enslaved the Phlors and used his ring to turn them into giants. Declaring them his "hammer and sledge," he changed their name to the Phlogs.[234]

When Queen Emim's attempt to slip it off her husband's finger—after it spoke to her one night while her husband slept—failed when he awoke in a fury, she instead chopped off his ring finger and fled. That morning, she announced herself the sole ruler of the land. The fighting that ensued was terrible to behold, for few had ever seen a king and queen, armed to the teeth, on opposing sides. Bobog spilt Bobog blood upon the crystalline sands. The appearance of the now gargantuan Phlogs terrified Queen Emim's army, but she had her own surprise, and when she blew the Horn of Tornidon, a dozen conscripted Gorax joined the fray!

An observant Phlog named Omaron, who paid close attention to the chatter of the Bobog nobles about the magic of a ring, knew then that there was a better option than to die in someone else's war, and he instructed his people to withdraw from battle. With the Kingdom of Og now in the tumult of self-annihilation, Omaron made his way across the battlefield and stole the finger of Og from around Queen Emim's cold neck where she'd hung it.

With corpses smeared across the fields and the king and queen having killed each another, the War of the Giants concluded. Both sides had lost, and about them lay their kingdom in ruins. The surviving Gorax took whatever valuables they felt owed them and stalked off, leaving the few dispirited Bobog who remained to disperse across the Endor Moon. The Phlogs now ruled Simoon.

A wiser race then, they appointed Omaron as their king. His first order of business was to have the Ring of Emim, as he now called it, shrink them back to their normal size. When that failed, however, he ordered it destroyed, knowing then that it brought only evil. Tragically, his youngest son, Prince Corub, was not as prudent as he. Substituting the Masbat Shard for another that looked like it, he hid the real one. After the faux ring was destroyed, the Phlogs went about repairing Bobog Burg and the royal palace for their habitation.

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[234] By this name are they now known throughout the galaxy. Early Republic explorers had brought word of the races of Endor—and a few willing travelers—back with them.

Prince Corub determined that he would be patient and learn to wield its powers correctly. Years passed. Then, in the weeks following the death of his father, killed by a rampaging Gorax, as the Phloggen Kingdom prepared to crown Prince Sebem, who was King Omaron's eldest son, Prince Sebem disappeared. A wide search was conducted, but the Prince was never seen again. His disappearance became a mystery, with stories ranging from a tragic mishap in the Soomian Swamps that bordered the southernmost Forest of Blog to foul play at the hands of the Gorax. This was the catalyst that led to the years of the Phlog-Gorax Skirmishes.

After yet another period of mourning, the appointment of king went to Omaron's youngest son, Prince Corub, who wore the Ring of Emim on a chain around his neck. King Corub declared it undignified to dwell in the royal palace of King Og and ordered his people to tear it down and build him a proper palace atop the ruins. No longer would they be looked down upon by other races. King Corub had seen magnificent visions of him ruling the Endor moon, and this was but the second step towards that goal. Any Phlog that dared to disagree with him, which they began to do as he grew increasingly unstable, was transformed into a docile idiot, for such was the power of the ring and maliciousness of the king who found this punishment amusing.

The Ewoks were aghast to discover the Phlogs destroying the sacred woods of their forest home to build a castle, but as they spoke to the woodcutters, they learned that they were either blindly obsequious to their cantankerous king's demands or fearful of disobeying him.

The felling of the Great Trees of the Forest of Simoon was the spark that propelled the guardian tribe of Ewoks back to their ancestral lands of Happy Grove. Thereupon, they reconstructed Bright Tree Village and built anew Panshee Village and Red Bush Grove, from which many would spread out to various additional locations such as the Southern Lake Village.

What none of the ring's possessors ever suspected was that the Masbat Shard was a piece of the Shadowstone! The incursion of the spirits of the Indur Elders into the Shadowstone—the event that forged the Sunstar part of it—had been no gentle process. In the resistance that Kedavra had put up, a splinter broke off. Though but a tiny piece, it contained all the malevolence of its Mistress.

The shard had gone unnoticed at the time of its breakage, and it waited until all those who'd helped the Ruling Council departed Indurla. Then, when it sensed the presence of a giant Masbat (a variant of the Shredder Bat) flying overhead, it called to the creature who came down to pick up the shiny object.

The shard compelled the Masbat to bring it to Bobog Burg. With Masbats being uncommon in the region, the creature was spotted with something sparkling clutched in its claws, begetting stories of the Masbat and the crystal, which led to treasure hunts on the part of local tribes. But the terrible voice of the shard had frightened the poor creature even more than the desert he'd been commanded to cross, and he dropped the shard in the Shifting Sands of Simoon where it would lay buried for many passings of the sun. Long years hence, it came into the trembling hands of the burgrave of Bobog Burg who gifted it to King Og. All the burgrave recalled of having found it was a terrifying vision of a Giant Owl that loomed before him. When next he blinked, the creature was gone, and in its place lay the glimmering Masbat Shard.

THE JOTNAR

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The Frost Giants had not always been the monsters they were now regarded as. They had been a large race of noble warrior-poets dedicated to the defense of their Crystalline Mountains which, in a forgotten age, had gone under attack by Xothians, Gond, and even the Xevious, whom the Jotnar had defeated and driven offworld.

That was before the flickering touch of abyssal fires, before the Jotnar cracked open the hoary wormhole to the Space Between Spaces, countenancing the innominable to traverse the opaque windows to where they aught not.

Morag transformed her appearance into one of the Jotnar in order to enter their terrible Mountain of Doom without drawing unwanted attention. Save to nod or grunt in customary fashion, the Frost Giants went about their various tasks and generally ignored her. A simple *location* spell led her to the tunnel that wound to the Sanctum of the Venerable where, in evenly spaced rows, stood the statues of those Frost Giants that had been turned to stone by a powerful Xothian.

Several chambers seemed to venerate Endor's Monitors alongside ornate altars dedicated to other boreal deities of foreign origin. This hexagonal chamber seemed to hold the most significant of these gods, but another roughly hewn octagonal chamber which extended from it caught her attention. Given the crude deities it contained, she surmised that the Jotnar had ceased their devotion to these disturbing heretical gods but, too fearful to destroy them, simply tucked their idols away.

Returning to the first chamber, she approached the central idol, the Queen of Winter's Birth. The old crone known as Bera stared out with a grim expression at some unseen adversary, possibly Life itself judging by her wrinkles and deep-set eyes. In her tightly gripped hands she bore the Giants' Hammer that was said in their myths to have built the Frost Giants' mountain homes.

Adjacent to Bera's statue was her counterpart, a younger goddess called Mara, the Queen of Winter's Death. She looked up to the sky in grief, petitioning the gods to spare the life of her lover after the one-eyed giant had killed him. Her hands were open in supplication. Morag recalled that in other myths, the cycloptic giant was the protagonist of the tale, with Mara's mortal lover the obstacle to his happiness.

Morag approached the goddesses and cast a *retectum* spell which exposed hidden technology triggered by the appropriate sacrifices and easy enough for one such as her to manipulate with a minor *mechu-fūnctum* casting.

The heads of the idols turned to look upon her: "We are the Sisters of the Seasons and the Maidens of Lil, the Satyr and the Lamia, the Maiden and the Hag, the Forgotten of the Gods and Keepers of the Lore. Tell us… What is it you seek?"

Morag snorted derisively but played along, announcing herself as per the custom: "Queen to queens, I request the history of the Jotnar."

The two idols took turns telling the tale. The Hag began with the transformation of the Jotnar Kings into Frost Giants, which was framed in a positive light. The saga began with the civil wars between them; the rebellion of their neighbors, forcing the Jotnar to send Ice Beetles to subdue the revolting villages and bring some back as food and some as sacrifices; the curse that fell upon them by the cruel Season Deity

Boreacubra who struck down the great King of the Frost Giants and altered the Jotnar people so that they could no longer eat or drink; the saga ended with their turn to the Windagon who provided them their deadly frost breath.

The Hag went silent as the Maiden picked up the saga of the next age, culminating in the Frost Giants' defeat at the hands of the Kete Prince, Titterbug Princess, Fleebog King, and Trome Shaman. Aided by Queen Maeve and a roving Skandit named Bandelier Rax who'd accompanied them, the tiny party was transported to the Mountain of Doom. An enchantment by the Trome Shaman succeeded insofar as it kept the Frost Giants asleep while Rax and the others planted insidious Fire Plants at the foot of the mountain and near any egress, ensuring the Jotnar would be kept prisoners in their mountain. When a passing Mantigrue and its Quork Rider spotted the intruders and swooped down to attack, the prince and princess fended it off with tiny weapons that had been magically designed by the Flower Queen to protect them from predators great and small. It could not, however, prevent the creature's terrible shriek, which woke the sleeping giants. As the angry Jotnar came running to the sound of the Mantigrue, the Fleebog King rushed into the forbidden mountain to lead them away, allowing the Kete Prince and Titterbug Princess, who had fallen in love, to escape. Though the Fleebog King was eventually found and killed, his sacrifice had not been in vain. The Frost Giants could no longer depart the vicinity of their lair as they soon discovered when they made the attempt and started to melt.

With the passage of years, the Ice Beetles found other ways to burrow out of the mountain, and as the Fire Plant was the sole antidote to their bites, many braved the mountain to pluck them, weakening the protective canopy until the Jotnar broke through the Mountain of Doom. During this time, however, the Quorks and their dragon-mounts had learned of their weakness and exploited it, keeping the Frost Giants in check for years until they too were overpowered by the Protectors of Endor.

By the time the Jotnar were free again to roam the lands, they were a relic of a bygone time, a conquered race. And still Boreacubra reigned, keeping an eye on them lest they fall into old habits. Thus, they remained near their ancestral home and were less of a threat than their forebears had been.

As the idols of the crone and goddess could tell her nothing more, Morag re-entered the alcove to examine the octagonal chamber and those stranger deities that had first drawn her attention.

MORAG AND THE GOD OF THE COLD WHITE SILENCE

The ceilings ran several meters higher here, with the room's overall shape that of an eight-pointed star. The idols were intended to inspire fear and recalled to her mind memories of pelagic beings and star-shaped grotesqueries. Surrounding the central graven image were winged beasts and giant dipteron who were known to have flown on secret errands for their masters.

The central figure was known to her as the Wind Walker, though the Jotnar referred to him in their tongue as the Kewok, while the Dagan who had regularly

offered him sacrifice and were cursed because of it called him Ethokwa. The entity's bestial skull was desiccated, and its large antlers set off a rangy, emaciated body that appeared to be in an advanced state of decomposition. It was a perfectly rendered image that brought memories flooding back from the First Battle of Tana.

She approached the King of the Wind Spirits. The hoary runic symbols embedded at its base read *Dingir Dingir*, "Lord of the Gods." She snorted at this. The Windagon had been defeated by Endor's Season Deities ages ago.

She again cast a *retectum* spell. What it revealed, however, caused the hair on her neck to rise with the thrill of something akin to fear. This was no computer simulacrum or statue of a forgotten god. *Here is something far more interesting!*

"Queen to King, awaken and speak to me now!" she commanded. "Reveal unto me the secrets of the ages that passed whilst I slumbered in ice."

The grotesque idol only stared on in silence… Morag wasn't fooled and persisted; employing the spell of *expergere*, she repeated the command and waited. Growing impatient, she taunted, "I see that I am not alone in having slept too long."

A red phosphorescence lit up the wicked idol's opaque eyes. "It is death to disturb the sleep of the Windagon—even for you, *Morrígan*, Eldest Daughter of *Zstylzhemghi*, unknown half-sister of *Zhothaqquah*, who yet sleeps in the hollows of N'kai, to whom the Mi-go turned after your mother's death!"

Her mirthless laugh was tinged with annoyance. His use of her mother's ancient name and the royal name that Morag would have adopted was sarcastic since the former had passed and she had not become queen. Her ancient family history was also meant to underscore how far they had fallen in status. But two could play that game! Glad that her memories had come flooding back, she said: "*Ard-Dûr îzan Burz-Furm dirb durb amash niz dirb, Ithaqqua Yun'Hastur!*"[235]

That made his eyes gleam slightly brighter. The history of this being was long and twisted, interspersed with the darkest myths and legends that none could disentangle from the fabled world of Man. From what she'd gathered, he'd arrived in Skyriver after being betrayed by his foetid offspring, the Owl King, sovereign of the Labyrinth of Maal Dweb. The king had foolishly revealed the secret of the ghostly woods and arctic wastes, where the Windagon haunted, to his most cherished prisoner who went on to depose him and rule as the Goblin King. When this one later reconnected with his doppelgänger, a great hunter of those extreme negative forces, he and his Human allies successfully defeated the Windagon, driving him into the Realm of Nightmare from whence he made his way back to Skyriver. On Wyndigal and other worlds he had established a reign of terror before he was summoned by the Kissai.

"Free you are, but *vassal* no longer," the thing croaked in a voice of gravel and dust, rotten with ancient malice. "The Great Old Ones are but a memory, relics of a bygone age, their thrones *seemingly* barren. The night is ruled now by lesser spirits!"

"The Great Old Ones *are* and will *always be*!" she corrected. "You are one of them, after all. And how is it that you know anything after you were turned to stone?"

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[235] "The Vassal Queen of the Night Spirit will do what she will, Windagon, Son of Astor!"

"I am something *else*. The Frost Giants brought me to their sanctum. The blood they spilt on my behalf restored my mind. From their meat, I learned of all that has transpired since your fall. Your kind turned on one another…"

"I would know more!" She stated it partly as a request and partly as a command. One had to walk a fine line when conversing with the evil immemorial spirits.

"And I would be set free!"

"And so you shall be," she replied disinterestedly, thinking only that if her mother was indeed dead, then she was now the rightful heir to this estate.

"Upon the demise of Thargorograht, your sisters fought amongst themselves for rule of the Great Black Nest…" That came as no surprise. Her sisters were a vicious, unsentimental, and competitive lot. "The survivors yet reign over fragmented and divided fiefdoms. As to the Kindred, they were broken by the death of Nyeegath, whom your mother slew mercilessly. There is enmity now between your sisters and their race, yet none will probe the viscid skein of the Great Black Nest and even the Great Webs are avoided for now. As to the Ancient Ones to whom you swore obeisance, some stir in their prison of stars, and some roam free!"

"The Night Queen swore no obeisance to *them!* Has any claimed her throne?"

"The forsaken throne of accursed Urthha was claimed by one of the Eldritch Powers long before your mother ascended upon it, before she set loose my adversary!"

"And who might that be?" she demanded.

"The Vampire Queen yet ranges unfettered!"

By this title she understood him to mean the Dread Mother, though the Night Queen had referred to her as *Horla*. "No *friend* of yours, aye?"

The entity made an evil sound that might have been a laugh. Moragarom already knew that in ages past he had exiled Harla from her ancestral world of Drômencas and so made of her an eternal adversary. The Night Queen had been clever. When she removed the Elder Sign seal that released the Wind Walker from his Celestial prison on Borea, it was in exchange for his aid in ridding the galaxy of her rivals when the time came. That she had *also* restored his adversary was her insurance that the Windagon made good on his promise. Morag thought quickly. The fact that he hadn't had the opportunity to do this would be something she could exploit.

"Very well… a debt you still owe to *our* Queen!"

"A debt paid when first I came to your aid!" By this he referred to the time when he'd fought on her behalf and ended up turned to stone by the Season Deities.

"*Partial* payment is not debt paid… Besides, it is only information that I require at this time."

"And *all* you shall receive! Then, the debt is paid in full. Now, release me!"

Morag began a series of complicated rituals and snarled utterances. "You are free," she growled, none too pleased with how much it had taken out of her.

"Now I return to the harvest, for it is bountiful, and the hunger is strong."

Of his hunting grounds she knew little and cared less. Steeling herself for the answer, she demanded, "Not yet! Tell me of Stagorr."

The towering, gaunt creature had already arisen and stalked across the octagonal chamber, startling two Frost Giants who happened to be in the adjoining one before it

turned its hideous face back upon her: "Frozen and hidden by the Monitors. Seek the tallest of the Ice Mountains… but know this: *you will not like what you find!*"

"There is little in the worlds that I like! But it will further me along my destiny."

"Perhaps, but I will utter one final warning, *Morrígan*, would-be Queen of the Night Spirit… You have passed through ice, but I see the shadow of fire and earth hovering above and beneath you… waiting to devour!"

With that, the Wind Walker's face seemed to liquify as it changed to that of that an ancient, beaked watcher. Then, as the Emperor Owl, he spread his wings and flew off into the gray twilight.

Moragarom never saw the entity again, though rumors would come to her from time to time of a winter god stalking the northern regions of Endor, ever on the prowl for the lost and depraved to sate his endless hunger and bitter loneliness.

THE TYRANNY OF MUTATION

It was while exploring the forests near to their ancestral home that a young Logray and his friend Niddu made the trip to see the magic-worker known as Morag, of whom they had heard intriguing rumors. The son of Shaman Makrit, Niddu was working towards becoming a warrior. Logray was Makrit's apprentice. Morag was said to live in the nearby Eastern Morah Forest, and though the locals didn't trust her, that was no cause for alarm, as the locals didn't trust anyone they didn't already know. So they came, eager to trade for a potion to help Shaman Makrit with a spell.

"Why do you wish for such a thing?" Morag asked casually after introducing herself. Although annoyed at the unexpected visit, she was intent on keeping a low profile for the time being, and that meant continuing to play the role of a humble Amaran enchantress. Few knew who Morag had been—not even her increasing army of magically-modified underlings—though for the Gorax, Yuzzum, and Duloks, it would not have mattered. Her history lay aeons in the past. As she had done long before, she told everyone she met a false story of her origins on the Endor moon, claiming that she was the sole survivor of a shipwreck.

While the Ewoks chattered on, she dug out the jar of powder that they'd requested, the results of which would terrify any who approached the area upon where it was sprinkled. She had used the very same formula ages ago when she raised up her first dwelling on this world and used it recently again when she fashioned her Bog Temple. Thoughts of the past stirred up memories of her family. She'd sent Odra several missives by means of carriers, but she never received a response in return. As to Stagorr, she planned a trip to the far-off Ice Mountains to return him to her side, but she first needed the Stone of Shadow to release him from the Snow King's spell.

A mere youth then, naïve and brash as only the young can be, Logray found the fox-faced Morag exceedingly attractive and charming. To impress her, he told her of the Ewoks' sworn duty to protect an artifact known as Sunstar-Shadowstone, which he described as an object of great power. Morag's eyes widened as she instantly recognized what it truly was, but she quickly feigned disinterest. "I heard it said it is a mere bauble," she mocked, turning her back on them as she pretended to clean up.

Logray disagreed, telling her old stories of the artifact that he'd heard, interspersing it with news of their recent estrangement from the Duloks and other related matters. Niddu then managed to interrupt him, having earlier detected a look on Morag's foxy face that made him feel that they shouldn't be saying so much. He nudged Logray and announced that they were late and had to return home.

"Indeed, the forest can be dangerous at night," she said to Niddu pointedly.

Morag knew this Sunstar-Shadowstone had to be the very same Shadowstone that had been bestowed on her by her mother and a powerful object that signified her rightful rule of Endor. She winked as she gave Logray a few additional items, a lantern and bar of soap to help with insects, and invited him to return any time he pleased.

Niddu could clearly see that Logray was smitten with her, but there was something about this Morag that bothered him. He couldn't yet place what it was, but he intended to keep his eyes open. Morag would continually trade with Logray over the next few months, attempting to seduce him as she had Stagorr long before. But always Niddu was there by his side to interfere with her plans.

The Endor Gate was a regular source of problems for unwary captains, and not a few survivors of downed vessels ended up caught by Morag or her creatures. One group of crashed slavers had released the Hanadaks, carnivorous primates who bowed only to the Gorax. But over the violent and avaricious slavers Morag practiced a newly relearned incantation. And upon its completion, there stood before her loyal foot soldiers who she sent to harry the Ewok tribes and bring her the Shadowstone. This was the beginning of the Grass Trekkers. That they ultimately proved unsuccessful had much to do with the nature and mitigating effects of Endor's moon. Morag had heard such things but didn't yet believe them.

One day, the *Free Enterprise*, carrying a large troupe of Jinda entertainers and their pet Mandrills, crashed on Lesser Tana. Morag deemed the former to be idiots and scared them off, but the latter were intelligent, strong, and loyal. She'd been looking for such ones, those untainted by the potent Tanaic magic of the Indur. She led these into the hidden caves within the dormant volcano of Mount Thunderstone. Once incapacitated, she began a trying spell that would imbue the creatures with a portion of her sapience, giving her a devoted cadre of "daughters" that she could use to help her take control of the world—tulpas who would carry out her will.

Some of the Ewoks who had seen the ship coming down came running to see what they could do to help. Amongst them were Logray and Niddu, who'd been heading to Morag's home for another trade, and Prince Chirpa, who was Chief Buzza's son. They spotted her in the distance with the party of Mandrills. The group was too far away to hear their calls, so they followed them to see who the new arrivals were. Although the Ewoks lost the trail, which was odd since they were natural trackers, they heard the squealing of creatures in distress and found a hidden fissure at the base of the mountain. They followed the echoing cries to Gramary Grotto which Morag had set up to practice her more prodigious spells and where a terrible scene now unfolded.

Logray called out to her as he dashed forward, dismayed at what Morag seemed to be doing to the poor creatures. Against Chirpa's order to hold back, Niddu chased after Logray. The other Ewoks, concerned with rescuing the Mandrills, used their

slingshots and bows to distract Morag, spoiling the complex incantation at the worst possible time.

To Logray's horror, her appearance began to shift. Looking upon a basin filled with murky cave water, Morag roared as her face and body were settling into that of a Mandrill itself. "What have you done, fools!" She tried several different incantations, but nothing would change her back!

The Ewoks rescued the Mandrills but not before Niddu was captured by the enraged witch who, with a furiously uttered spell, brought down a stone wall behind her, crushing one Ewok and keeping the others at bay and unable to follow her. With the sun setting and the minions of Morag creeping out from the spreading shadows to finish off the intruders, the Ewoks were left with no choice but to flee and bring the confused Mandrills to their village.

"We are the tulpas of the witch," the half-dazed Mandrills told Chief Buzza and Shaman Makrit on the platform of the central village's meeting place. Chief Buzza insisted on calling them "Tulgah Witches" after the dense Tulgey Oakwoods he'd grown up near, but they didn't seem to mind. He grilled them as to everything they knew since crashing on Endor. But as they'd only gained part of Morag's sapience and powers (and not her personality) just before the spell was broken, it wasn't much.

Though the Tulgah Witches were tasked to try to locate Niddu, Morag was psychically linked to them and could see what they were doing, allowing her advanced warning of their intent. They could also detect her presence as well and often warned the Ewoks of the "wicked Tulgah Witch," but as the Endor moon was an unfamiliar environment to them, Morag still had the advantage. Then, after a nearly successful attempt by Morag to magically wrest control over them, bidding them to steal the Shadowstone and kill anyone who opposed them, the Tulgah Witches knew it was time for them to depart before they brought harm to their new friends.

With the help of several Gharial, who repaired their ship and volunteered to fly it, the Tulgahs departed offworld, escaping Morag's baleful influence and employing their abilities to benevolent ends in worlds across the stars.

TO THE DEVIL A DAUGHTER

Ironic it was that Niddu would prove key to her success. Morag now promised to exchange the son of the Shaman for the Shadowstone. Chief Buzza was torn, for their tribe had been entrusted to keep this artifact safe since longer than he knew… but this was Makrit's own son.

Unwilling to let him perish at her hands, he gave Morag her much-coveted prize.

It was the darkest day for the Ewoks when they received Niddu's head in exchange. Morag had been furious at the Ewoks for causing her appearance to solidify into that of an old hag with a Mandrill head, and had killed Niddu almost immediately, skinning him for a fur vest that she later gave to Ilgo when she appointed him Dulok King. The vest became a mark of royal status amongst the Duloks.

When King Ilgo died, it passed to his son, Prince Ulgo, at his coronation. When King Ulgo was exiled for gross dereliction of duty, the vest was taken from him and

given to his nephew Vulgarr, who would serve as the new king, passing up Ulgo's son, Prince Heelgo, who was hated even more than his father due to his cowardice in the face of a deadly Ploob raid. But King Vulgarr had no appreciation of symbols and traded the vest back to Ulgo for lantern birds (considered a delicacy amongst the corrupted Duloks) that the exiled king raised in his cave in the Canyon of Mists.

Shaman Makrit would never be the same again. Enervated by grief, he fell to madness, dark magic, and the worship of a Gorax called the Great Devourer to whom he sacrificed woklings. In disgrace, Makrit died at the Gorax's hands.

As Bright Tree Village went into another period of mourning, Logray took it upon himself to punish Morag and trekked off in the dark to Mount Thunderstone. But the apprentice was no match for her and would remain her prisoner for years afterwards. The Ewoks tried several times without success to rescue him, but they could not continue to risk warriors after their recent losses. For her part, Morag liked Logray and was amused by his attempts at using Tanaic magic against her. She understood his rage and let him vent. Finally, he reasoned that if he was to survive, he would have to dissemble and learn enough magic to escape. After ensorcelling him, she took him to her domicile in Bog Temple which was sealed with a spell to keep him from wandering off. Then she offered to continue the training that Makrit had started.

Now that she had the great Shadowstone, Morag was disturbed to see that it had been physically and spiritually altered. It would not blindly obey her as it once had. More disappointingly, it would not restore her shapeshifting powers. She could still use illusions, but that was hardly adequate. When she tried to probe its depths to commune with it, she heard other voices urging her to lay aside her evil plots. *So this is why the blasted Furlings call it the Sunstar-Shadowstone!* she thought crossly. *My mother's great possession, tampered with, probably by those forgotten Firstborn. No matter, I will find a way of restoring it. Until then, it is time to reunite the family.*

It was a long flight to the Blue Star Mountains, but Morag didn't mind, as the wild beauty of the region appealed to her sensibilities, and Chrysophilea was a good companion. "When I restore my Shadowstone to its former glory, I'll transform myself into a Mantigrue and never change back!"

"This pleases me to hear!" Chrysophilea uttered. "Then together we can melt the Mountain of Doom and end the Frost Kings once and for all!"

Morag laughed, agreeing that it would be done. Arriving just as the decrescent sun bathed the tree-tops in an ocherous mantle of samite and sard, Morag's mood soured. Chrysophilea, intrinsically understanding the difficult relationships with children, remained silent. Morag stiffly disembarked. "This may take some time," she informed the Mantigrue. "You may hunt or do as you like until I summon you."

"May all that you wish come to pass, O Great One," Chrysophilea said, stalking off.

Morag had never seen Odra's rimy palace in the Blue Star Mountains. It was ornate, if a bit modest in size, fashioned to look like an ice sculpture in a style that would have appealed to her intractable daughter. Constructed partly with magic, it glistened with mystic energies. From her spies she knew that Odra yet lived and ruled here. That she'd maintained a royal position meant she was at least clever. Hopefully

with age came wisdom, as she would make for a good ally, but it yet troubled her that she hadn't responded to her urgent epistles.

After waiting too long for the portcullis to open and the castle guard to leave, Morag knew she'd be met with disappointment. At last she appeared. "Best you depart, beggar," she hissed, "before you frighten the children and I'm forced to call my sentries." If nothing else, Odra had maintained her appearance and imperious demeanor over the long centuries. Morag was less impressed by the gaggle of brats that hovered and made noise behind her.

Before the door could be slammed in her face, she growled, "No beggar am I but your own mother!"

"I refuse to believe that *you*, some squat, squishy-faced monster, are the beautiful Lindronnigen, my powerful mother of old. I think not."

With a sibilant curse, Morag said, "I have not traveled all this way for your impertinence," and pulled out her staff upon which sat the Sunstar-Shadowstone. "Perhaps *this* will convince you." And for too brief a moment, she was Lindronnigen again. Although the crystal had been deaf to her demands, the illusion should suffice.

Odra's face contorted into a mask of horror and disgust. "So it *is* you! I had thought your letters a hoax. What *happened* to you?" Her exclamation brought the urchins to the door, googling and drooling. Morag sighed. It was as Mynyd had warned: Odra was but a shadow of what she'd been. If anything, her bevy of servants, maids, and impudent children had made her even more petulant and spoiled.

"I passed through death! Now, pack up your things, and let us go retrieve your father. There is much to do ere we begin our conquest of Lesser Tana!"

"You have been away a long time, mother. It's called *Endor* now and I won't be going anywhere with you. I am the Duchess of Sleet and have duties to attend to. Is this why you've come back, to jeopardize my standing with the King?" Then, lowering her voice, she added, "I spent centuries enchanted in ice after trying to force his hand and even longer trying to regain his trust. I have it now, and all of it would be destroyed by bringing *him* back, he whose betrayal the king still grieves!"

"*Ungrateful offspring,*" Morag stormed incredulously, "it was a betrayal he made because *you* demanded the king's hand!"

"And demand it, I still do!" she growled. "I have plans, and nothing, not that drip of a husband I was saddled with, nor *you*, suddenly back from death, will spoil them!"

Morag turned with frustration to her unruly grandchildren who had popped their heads back out at their mother's outburst. "Scram!" she charged, but that only got them giggling and scampering about like mongrels. All she could think was that they would turn out just like their mother, though her opinion changed on seeing one who stood back, dark and morose, unlike her siblings. To her, she stuck out her tongue, eliciting a smile. *Perhaps there is hope yet*. Then, turning back to Odra she said, "How is it that I have been frozen for an age and you are *still obsessed with the Snow King!* You could rule from his own palace once we take back what is ours!"

Odra turned red. "You don't know my life! While you were… *sleeping*, I have had to make my way in this world by myself! It has not been without hardship."

"I am offering you *real* power, not position and prominence amongst the curs of *Endor*. This land was promised to our line. We have but to claim it!"

"Your *promises* never come true! The Protectors of Endor bested you, and they will do so again. No, mother. I will have power my own way."

"Then I have raised a fool for a daughter!"

"I think it is best that you depart, old woman," Odra said, her eyes turning glacial. "Go and peddle your wares somewhere else. I have things to do."

The portcullis slammed shut. Morag was tempted to burst in and knock her infuriating daughter on the head. But she only shook her own head and sighed. *What would the* great *Night Spirit think*? And then Morag remembered the behavior of her sisters… As she walked away, disappointed in life and the worlds, she realized that before rescuing her husband, she'd have to consolidate her power-base at Mount Thunderstone, ensure that her dim-witted minions remained loyal to her, replenish her mundane and magical supplies, and figure out what to do about Logray, who was yet awaiting her return. *I will do what Mother could not and take the Endor moon!*

GOODBYE TO ROMANCE

It had taken longer than she'd wanted, but Morag finally set out to rescue Stagorr in the depths of Devil's Peak, the tallest mountain in the Ice Mountain range far north of the Mountain of Doom and the Crystalline Crags wherein lived the Frost Giants. She and Logray traveled this part of the journey on foot, for although Chrysophilea had offered to take her the entire way, she knew the Mantrigues did not fly over those mountains. Frost Giants kept lookouts hidden in the peaks and would sling stones and toss javelins at them as they glided over.

She had taught Logray several thaumaturgical skills that would help them along the way. Years had passed since first she trapped him, and he was no longer an awkward adolescent but a full-grown Ewok. His disposition had also improved considerably since then. She'd had a partial hand in that, but not entirely.

Devil's Peak was formidable to look upon, but their cantraips allowed them to successfully navigate to its hidden tunnel leading to the chamber holding the erstwhile chamberlain of the Snow King.

With the Sunstar-Shadowstone in hand, she melted the frozen block, relieved and even joyful to see Stagorr again after all these years. It took several moments before he could speak. "Who is this that thaws me from my deathlike slumber?" the forbidding ice-being asked.

Morag announced herself. "My form is not as you recall, but can you not recognize your beloved wife?" She puzzled over the fact that the *illusion* spell cast by her staff did not seem to work on Stagorr as it did on Logray, who saw only the beautiful Amaran form he'd fallen in love with, his memory of her actual form expunged.

"You—*shrew*—are what's become of my great and beautiful enchantress? You should have left me trapped in the ice!"

"You are not the same as I recall either!" she rejoined, not bothering to hide the acrimony she felt at his bitter response.

When Stagorr did not respond, Logray did. Unable to keep his indignation in check, he blurted: "Is this how you address the Great Morag who spent long years searching for you? Who embarked on a lengthy and strenuous journey to free you?"

"Is this chattering *pet* your new lover?" Stagorr asked cruelly. "He does not know or see you for who you are! How far you have fallen, Lindronnigen!"

"So I've heard," Morag replied, undaunted. "Husband, disappointed though you may be, I *have* freed you, and a wife and daughter you still have. There is much work to be done if we are to punish the Monitors for what they did and bring this land to heel."

"Even now, you think naught but of rule!" Stagorr snarled. "You and your spoiled daughter are the reason I betrayed my oath and was duly punished. This obsession is the reason you first deceived me. And what of this *great mother* of yours—the Night Queen—who was going to make the stars tremble? Has she been turned into a mole?"

Morag visibly bristled, but she held her tongue. "She was betrayed and killed…"

"Then all that you dreamed of these long years was in vain, and all that you planned has come to naught!"

"We do not need her to rule!" Morag insisted. "*I* am the *rightful* Queen!"

"Ha!" he laughed humorlessly. "I have no use for your fantasies, wife. They are as foolish and vain as Odra's. Tell me truthfully, if you can, how long have I slumbered in ice? It feels like an age."

"Never have I lied to you, husband. It has been many millennia…"

"*Many millennia!*" he said icily.

"I too was frozen for long years, and when I was awakened, I did not know where you had been entombed."

But Stagorr's mood had curdled upon hearing how long he'd been ensconsed in ice, and though she tried to reason with him, he no longer cared for anything she had to say. When he ceased plucking at the leaves of a nearby vine, which instantly froze in his hands, he turned to her at last. "Listen to me carefully, *witch*," he articulated, "so that we understand one another. Whatever love I had for you or for your imp, Odra, is long gone. My heart, along with my body, was frozen long ago—and not even your magic can defrost it… and for that I am glad! For all that I touch turns to ice! See, here is a demonstration!"

Taken by surprise, Morag failed to complete a *praesidium* spell before Stagorr reached out to grab her, encasing her in an arctic slab. Then, he laughed, "Now, perhaps, we are alike again." Turning to Logray, he said. "Will you join us, pet?"

But Stagorr hadn't counted on the diminutive creature having magical ability. With all his skill and indignation, Logray *pushed*, hurling Stagorr through the northwestern ice wall where it was thinnest. A large mound of snow crashed down on him.

Wasting no time, he defrosted Morag. "We must leave before he wakens."

She looked at him. "I'm glad you freed me," she stated quietly, "but I cannot go."

"What do you mean?" Logray asked, puzzled. "Surely, you aren't going to stay here with him after everything he said and did to you!"

"I will create an impenetrable wall around this mountain from which he will not readily escape."

"I will help you," Logray offered, preparing the spell in his mind.

"No," she said again in a firmer voice. "He is my problem to deal with. Return to Mount Thunderstone. I will see you there."

Crestfallen by her words and the coldness he now felt from her, he retorted, "I have not been your slave for many years."

"Have you not? My enmity yet lays with your kind for having stolen the prized jewel of my mother, as with all the Protectors of Endor for having defied my rule."

"That is *ancient* history…"

"Do not speak another word," she commanded, putting up a hand to silence him. He made a move to protest but, catching the dangerous look in her eye, ceased, knowing better than to disagree when she fell into one of her foul tempers. "Let us part as friends in the illusion of what might have been had the worlds been different."

It took several days before Morag returned to Mount Thunderstone exhausted and wishing only to sleep, but there she was met by a different Logray.

Troubled by the things that Stagorr had said, he'd begun looking into her past, peering into her history with the aid of the Crystal Image Spinner that they'd recently invented together (and which he'd placed in his backpack prior to her arrival). "So, Stagorr believed you to be a Frost Sprite from Akuria II. And you are no Amaran either, but rather some kind of… *creature* from the unhallowed Shadow Plane."

"It has been long since I have seen my darkling home in the Great Black Nest; I can barely remember it. Do not look so crestfallen, Logray. Sooner or your later, you would have found out." It was said forlornly and without rancor. "For what it is worth, Stagorr knew what I was and accepted it. But for you, the illusion should have remained. You would have been happier then… But it is done now."

Logray tried to maintain equanimity but was much too upset with all he'd learned, particularly his own part in it. "You *lied* to me… cast a spell on me. I do not know what is real and what is enchantment!"

"Our *alliance* was only ever of mutual convenience," she said gently. "Have you forgotten that I killed your friend? I see that you have… The spell I'd cast on you worked more forcefully than intended. Perhaps it is because you were young; or it may be that for all the hate you felt for me, part of you desired something which I had to offer. Do not look so guilty. I too fell under a spell of sorts. But surely now you see that such notions are for children and fools, not powerful ones such as we are… we who can conquer the stars if we wish!"

"Everything is changed," Logray said dolefully.

"Ever the dreamer," Morag retorted. "Not unlike Odra. You and I are *natural* enemies. Such is the way of the worlds. Let us forget it and carry on…"

While she began going about the business of settling back in, Logray took the staff that held the Sunstar-Shadowstone, which she'd placed on the rack she'd built for it. "If that is the case, then I know what I must do."

That drew a grim reaction from Morag. "Put that down!" she commanded. For years, the spell had assured her that she needn't worry about Logray betraying her, but the stress of what he'd recently learned must have broken it.

He exulted in her displeasure, giving full rein to his anguish. "I will not!"

She pulled at it telekinetically, but he'd anticipated that and cast a *lazgur* spell. So that she wouldn't continue fighting him, he followed it up with a Tanaic *iris* enchantment intended to cast a feeling of peace and tranquility.

"Foolish Furling! You should have learned by now that defensive nature spells do not work on me and instead have used the Shadowstone to imprison me. No doubt it would have obeyed *that* command!" Morag sighed. "Now, what will I do with you? I think an *oblīvium* casting is in order, don't you? Then, things can return to normal."

She telekinetically snapped the precious gem off the staff that he held, but as it floated over to her, Logray magically grabbed it, increasing the intensity of his will.

In turn, she trebled her command, which caused the gem to hover in space between them. The combatants drew upon their strength to claim it. Logray was the far-less experienced of the two, but he had youth and determination. Plus, he'd been practicing. Moragarom was ancient and powerful but also trapped in a weak body that was physically and emotionally exhausted. They both knew it was unwise to cast opposing spells at a magical object, as that could result in dire consequences, but neither would give in.

The Crystal Rider that was once known as Kedavra pulled against Logray. But the spirits of the Indur Ruling Council pulled against Morag. So, the jewel did the only thing it could do. It split into two halves. The dark half flew into Morag's hands, the light half to Logray's. So surprised was she by this that she could only watch as Logray held his half, put it in his backpack, and ran towards the exit, removing the magical net she'd cast around it.

"Do not do this, I beg of you!" she warned. He stopped to look at her. "If you do not return the half of my stone, then you will force my hand, and when next you see me, it will not be with mildness but rage, for the stone is mine by rights, and I will answer for its theft!" He hesitated. But something in him had changed as it had in her. Noting the stubbornness of his bearing, she nodded. "I see. You have made your choice. So be it. I must make mine. No longer will we live in illusions."

To the end of his days, he wondered if he took the Sunstar in spite, and if things would have gone differently had he just returned it. All he knew was that he ran.

Once she discerned that he was truly gone, she sat at her workbench and shunted off the Amaran form she'd worn with him. "Stagorr was right," she said aloud to herself, grasping tightly to the Shadowstone. "One cannot do what must be done and have a heart. Henceforth…" she pointed at her own, "I shall have none." A black ray emitted from her finger into her chest cavity. She seized. It was more painful than she'd imagined it would be, though she knew that such curses more often than not killed their users. *If death has come for me, then so be it,* she thought.

It was an agonizing minute that felt like an eternity. Finally, she breathed again, the pain subsiding, replaced by a feeling of utter cold emptiness; if there was a moment of regret, it soon passed as the hollow was filled by a simmering anger that never went away again. What had been her heart was now a charred stub. From that time forward, Morag wore a permanent scowl, able to find laughter only in the misfortune she caused her enemies.

When Logray finally returned to Bright Tree Village, wearied after his long and emotionally-fraught journey, he came before Chief Buzza and handed him the

Sunstar, telling him that it must be safely kept. But Buzza handed it back to him. "No safer place will it be than with you," he said. "Welcome back, Logray!"

Logray was received with a great celebration, but more than one Ewok noted that there was much that was different about him. He very rarely smiled and seemed haunted somehow, no longer the youthful and carefree Ewok he'd once been. His fur turned prematurely grey and remained permanently unkempt. It was but one of several latent effects of the magic battle he'd fought over the Sunstar-Shadowstone. As to his time with Morag, nothing could induce him to speak of it, though to assuage the inquisitiveness of the tribe who would ever seek to peer into his business, he'd implanted a sanitized version of events into the Crystal Image Spinner. The events in it were true enough, but they left out salient details that no one needed to know. Even he wished he could forget. Prince Chirpa seemed to surmise as much, but he would not breach his friend's privacy. Some things were best left unspoken.

Logray made his new home on the outskirts of the village, claiming it would better serve as a lookout in the eventuality of her reprisals, but as other warriors were posted at other locations, this only served to solidify his status as an outsider.

As expected Morag attacked Happy Grove with a host of her minions, and the battle that followed saw the death of Chief Buzza, though not before he'd killed Chrysophilea. Morag no longer had a heart to break; she'd seen to that. But the Mantigrue's passing was a devastating blow to her. Chrysophilea's children, to whom she fed Buzza's body, remained loyal to Morag, but things were never again the same.

She withdrew to her mountain keep and would not be seen for some years to come. Meanwhile, after the appropriate period of mourning, Prince Chirpa was made Chief of Bright Tree Village.

Logray came into the village monthly for supplies, but he left just as promptly. Chief Chirpa often came to see and spend time with his friend, but Logray knew what he really wanted. Shaman Makrit had died in ignominy and without a successor. Neighboring villages offered trainees, but Chief Buzza had chosen to do without one for a time. Logray knew there was a need, but he just wasn't ready. Chirpa would wait.

The seasons passed. Chief Chirpa married his long-time companion, Ra-Lee, and Logray was happy for them, but he did not linger long at the celebration. A new generation of children came to be, and it was they who brought light back to Bright Tree Village and happiness back to Happy Grove. For the Chief and the Chieftess, their beloved Princess Kneesa was the adoration and hope of the whole tribe, and soon enough, a bevy of rambunctious woklings would be roaming and playing.

Logray's inscrutable demeanour eventually attracted these inquisitive woklings who grew brave enough to venture near his hut and beset him with questions. At first, he was dismayed by this, but he soon found the woklings amusing. They seemed to kindle a bit of joy again in his heart, which had been murky and hushed as a long unused firepit, and he began to look forward to their curiosity and visits. Perhaps it was time to put the past behind him and embrace what life there was left to live.

Yet it wouldn't be until two Phlog scouts entered their forest, searching once more for wood to build yet another new palace for their new king, that Chirpa asked Logray to become their Shaman, a role he was finally ready to embrace. Thus did Logray become Medicine Man for Bright Tree Village.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-ONE

AUTUMNAL TALES OF THE ENDOR WOODS

THE TOTEM MASTER

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M'rdal Dupont was a vain and egotistical grifter who'd won and lost fortunes in the smuggling of plutonium nyborg and other contraband.

A Godoan-Twi'lek hybrid with a chip on his shoulder, he was also the sole survivor of a ship that crashed on Endor. Despite his bad judgement and intolerably mean spirit, he had the ability to manipulate people, which he employed the moment he approached the Corubian Countryside—formerly known as Bobog Burg—in search of a place in which to spend the night and rob its host. When the odd, orange-maned-and-bearded stranger was spotted and detained by the Phlogger Patrol, he effortlessly talked them into escorting him to Corubia Castle.

King Corub had long ago grown bored and frustrated with his fellow Phlogs, having transformed nearly all of them into obedient dimwits—including his own wives. The ring had granted him long life so that he'd survived to watch his generation and those that followed come and go. The consequence of this was that he was now miserable. Nor would the ring fix matters, which made him resentful. He had planned raids for several outlying hamlets, but, having lost prior engagements due to the buffoonery of his army, he barely had the heart left for marauding, especially after he began receiving terrifying visits from the ghost of his brother, Prince Sebem.

So it was that the haunted king gladly welcomed the garrulous trader, providing him copious food and drink. Dupont entertained the king with larger-than-life stories (most of which he'd invented or stolen from others) and presented him a gift: the last remnants of spice that he'd salvaged from his downed ship. This, King Corub welcomed, and he embarked on a course of indulgence accompanied by a litany of his own tall tales which soon turned to woe. Dupont listened sympathetically, encouraging the king to continue when he faltered. Corub hinted at some mysterious artifact that had aided him in attaining the throne, though, even in a drunken, spiced state, he refused to speak any further on it.

When the king finally fell asleep, as Dupont knew he would, the first thing he did was take out a sack into which he began placing several of the expensive utensils and tableware. As it was a magic sack, it could hold much greater content than it appeared and yet weigh no more than a standard bundle. In the midst of this task, Dupont remembered to search the king's person for jewelry and the unique object of which he'd spoken. He was in luck!

Around King Corub's neck, just beneath his tunic, hung the chain that held the ring. Immediately sensing its great value, Dupont slipped it off the king's head.

Disengaging it from the gold chain, which he threw in the sack, he placed the ring in the palm of his left hand. It was, of course, much larger than his own plump fingers, but to his surprise, it shrunk before his eyes to perfectly fit his middle finger. Here indeed was a rare magical artifact!

Pleased with himself for acquiring it, he stared into the stone.

The mind of the crystal could extract from those who wore it their deepest desires. Dupont did not want to be king, caring little for the responsibilities of governance. What he craved was excitement, mastery over others, and new treasures to add to his growing pile. But Dupont knew he was getting older. He could use assistance. The only problem was he didn't like other people.

The Ring of Emim—now the Ring of Dupont—granted him a vision in accordance with his petty nature. Henceforth, the ring would help him gather a mentally-enslaved gang of thieves that he could send out on missions as they traveled from village to village. But upon their return and deposit of goods, they would turn into totems so that they wouldn't be discovered and he wouldn't have to deal with them. It was a perfect plan.

But the ring ever extracted a price, and the first task it gave the future Totem Master was to set the Royal Palace on fire. Dupont considered it a shame, but he complied and started the blaze. Thankfully for the Phlogs, they managed to escape in time. When the infuriated king returned to his senses, he put a bounty on Dupont's head so high it forced the grifter into hiding.

Dupont commanded the ring to provide him safe refuge from his pursuers. In response, the ring transformed him into a tree, and in this form he remained for long years until King Corub died and his current son (many of his previous ones having lived and died without ascending the throne), Prince Corab, now took the throne.

King Corab did not care for his father's vengeance, wishing only for a new and better castle than the one that had burnt down. But as the Forest of Simoon was then infested with Rearing Spiders, he sent Phlog scouts in search of a forest containing the tallest and stoutet trees that they could harvest.

UNDER THE MOUNTAIN

Of Moragarom's sisters, Wyyyschok had by this time regained some portion of her former stature and was even more malignant than before, having lived for long years underground preying on the strange residents of Endor's underworld, and with insufficient amounts of these coming near to her dense, bone-strewn lair, she was forced to feast on her mates, the Rearing Spiders, and even her own offspring.

One day after trapping a boisterous Dulok who had gotten lost and ventured too far in the cave system that led near her domain, the green-furred creature—pleading for his life—claimed to serve a witch named Morag. Discerning from his description of her staff and jewel that this was, indeed, her long-lost sister, she finished masticating the crunchy Dulok and broke through the mountain to once again alight upon the moon's surface.

It would take time to find the lairs of this Morag in either the Bog Temple or Mount Thunderstone. Seeing as she would need regular sustenance on the journey, she fashioned a new nest in a cave that bordered the upperlands. Scouting the area, she located a nearby Ewok tribe in Hanging Moss Village and began her nightly predations. She looked forward to allying with Moragarom. Together they would devour all of the hateful Protectors of the Endor Moon! Months passed in this way, but just as Wyyyschok concluded preparations to travel to her sister's fortress, fate intervened.

The Ewoks she preyed on referred to Wyyyschok as the "Beast in the Mouth of the Mountain." When a Jedi Knight landed near their village, they demanded her aid and sent her to the Beast's lair. Wyyyschok had no time for such distractions, and after killing her droid and skull-headed companions, she moved to quickly poison and wrap up the "Force Witch." All might have gone as planned, for Wyyyschok moved exceedingly fast, had she not suddenly been struck with a vision that she then felt oddly impelled to share, chittering: "Betrayal comes at the hands of the Skull Ones!" It may be that Jedi Aayla Secura did not pay attention or simply did not care for the prognostication of evil arachnidlike beings, but she took advantage of the momentary distraction to slay the Great Spider Queen, unwittingly preventing a union of sisters that would have spelled doom for the Endor moon.

Memory of Wyyyschok remains with the Hanging Moss Tribe and amongst her daughters, the Webweavers, Giant Cave Spiders, and Mind-Spiders who yet hunt across the shadowy underworlds of many planets.

A PROPHECY COME TO PASS

Morag's obsession with the lost Sunstar blinded her, and her heartlessness caused her to make errors that she never otherwise would have made. No longer the crafty Moragarom nor the patient Lindronnigen, she was embittered, broken, and fueled only by thoughts of revenge. It did not help that the Duloks, Yuzzum, Lizard Warriors, Underwater Dwellers, and Quorks who served her were *so* incompetent. (This was a result of having broken the Spell of Seven Oaths). On the other hand, the Grass Trekkers had proved so aggressive that even non-allied races banded together to war against them and this kept their numbers low.

As she'd threatened, Morag made numerous attempts to destroy the Ewok tribes and reclaim the Sunstar. She sent out the Duloks en masse to destroy the precious Soul Trees, which each Ewok is intimately bound to, and later cast a spell on Izrina, Queen of the Wisties, to attempt to burn them alive.[236]

She used her Mantigrues to twice attack the Sunberries crucial to the Ewok diet and medicine. She unleashed the rat-sized, wood-eating Kermes not seen in centuries to destroy their tree village. She bred the giant Megawok to tear apart their homes. During the Moon Festival, she summoned a Stone Beast, a cockatrice who nearly

[236] Her first attempt was thwarted by the efforts of Erpham Warrick's war wagon, which caused King Ulgo to go into exile and be replaced by his nephew King Vulgarr, until he too was defeated by Logray and replaced by his son, Prince Gorneesh.

turned the entire tribe to stone. And in frustration, she defaced precious works of art and tried to turn a visiting Balinaka named BoRis into a tool for her vengeance.[237]

She tempted Zarrak, Logray's first apprentice, with black magic; enchanted an Isangrim pup named Wilk (this bore no fruit, as the creature had no tendencies towards violence); and fashioned an evil doppelganger of Chief Chirpa that she called Simon the Killer (violent but incapable of pretense, he was defeated by the Leaf Queen). These were but a fraction of the troubles Morag caused.

So great were her attempts at revenge that Logray now saw Morag only as the monster she'd become… but sometimes in the deepest part of the night, he'd remember that there had been another side to her and wondered what he might have done differently. Those were the nights in which he didn't sleep.

When, at last, Morag ensnared a group of young Ewoks, deceiving them by means of an illusion, casting about her the same Amaran form that had once enchanted Logray, she offered their lives in exchange for the Sunstar. Without hesitation, Logray traveled to Mount Thunderstone to return it to her. Morag cawed in triumph at the reuniting of the Sunstar-Shadowstone, the ancient Stone of Shadow.

Whether she'd intended to trigger the earthquake and volcano to punish Logray or made a reckless mistake in her overconfidence, or if the powerful stone acted of its own accord, the results were the same: pandemonium! With the mountain falling down around her and lava rising up from below, she commanded the Stone of Shadow to align Sistermoon and Brothermoon and bring forth her people from the Realm of Spirits to return her to the Great Black Nest in the forsaken lands of Illathurion. Far off in their bleak domain, the Wizards of the Night Spirit heard her call and flew forth to save the Eldest Daughter of their Mistress.

But by the time the King of the Night Spirits arrived, it was too late. Morag had fallen into the fires of her mountain and rose up again only to perish in stone. The prophecy of the Wind Walker had come to pass…

The legend of Morag spread far and wide, and the inducement of the Sunstar-Shadowstone ever drew the wicked seeking to possess it. Of these were the Imperial Argazdan scientist, Doctor Raygar; the winged Gargoyle, Gracca, who took possession of the Floating Mountain; the Mashi Horansi known as Jadru the Enchantress, who'd been exiled from Mutanda for practicing illicit magic when she'd summoned a Quarf shapeshifter as her familiar; and the Night Sister Charal, who had heard of Morag and thought she might pick up where the Tulgah Witch had left off.[238]

LATARA AND THE SECRET TULPA

Morag would have the last word. In secret, she'd long prepared and preserved a tulpa of Logray from his genetic material that she'd kept for the purpose of infiltrating Bright Tree Village. In life, she hadn't gotten around to releasing him from stasis

[237] She succeeded only in giving him dark fantasies which he later turned into depraved literature.
[238] As the Quarf are sometimes spelled as Quarff, Jadru can also be spelled Jaydru.

in her cave at the base of Mount Thunderstone, but now upon her death, he was set free, for the very destruction that resulted in Morag's fall opened the stasis chamber.

The false-Logray didn't take long to discover what had occurred nor to seize upon the knowledge that Morag had left behind. But he was patient, and there was much to learn and practice.

In the meantime, numerous creatures were being driven from their lairs due to the noise, air, and water pollution generated from the Empire's construction of a shield generator bunker which spanned seventeen square kilometers. One of these was a rampaging, maddened Griagh. Now, after all that the Ewoks had done to protect the Sunstar-Shadowstone, it in turn protected them and destroyed the insane Griagh. But in so doing, it was itself destroyed, releasing at last the long-inhabiting spirits of Kedavra and the gentle Indur Ruling Council.

Without the singular artifact to help protect Bright Tree Village, Logray returned to Morag's lairs to see about destroying any dangerous potions, charms, or spellbooks she'd left behind before they fell into the wrong hands. Once there, without his apprentice or anyone else around, he fell into grief and regret. The simulacrum fell upon Logray then. Stunned to see his mirror image, Logray put up little defense when he was struck on the head. The false-Logray then placed the unconscious shaman in his old stasis chamber. Pleased with himself, he packed up a few of Morag's items and trod to Happy Grove. With all the knowledge that Morag had implanted in him and the magic he'd learned since, the simulacrum would advance her plot and use the tribe's trust in him to corrupt them by means of the Dark Rituals, which had tainted the Duloks and others long ago. And if that failed, well… he had another plan.

What the simulacrum hadn't counted on was being pestered by an inquisitive apprentice. When Teebo stumbled upon Morag's magical items in Logray's hut and inquired about them, the false-Logray flew into a rage and ended the youth's apprenticeship on the grounds that the young Ewok was a hopeless, talentless nuisance that he'd humored for far too long.

Hurt and betrayed, Teebo turned inwards. Despite his friends' best efforts to comfort and cheer him up, Wicket and Kneesa could not reach him. The strain also proved too much for his relationship with Latara, which ended unhappily. Dyeing his fur in stripes of grey, Teebo put all of his energies into honing his warrior skills, which he'd neglected in the belief that he was going to become the tribe's next Medicine Man. While his new skills served him well during the incursion of the Galactic Empire, it was as if he'd been shattered along with the Sunstar.

A new era had dawned on the Endor moon, one dominated by the threat of mechanism and technology. The Protectors of Endor were unable to comprehend or stand against this pervasive menace that saw acres of trees sawed and burned, rivers poisoned, and the air fouled with malodorous stenches. So they laid low, hoping it would pass. But things only got worse…

The Galactic Civil War on Endor gave the Logray-tulpa an idea. After delving into the impressive abilities of the Crystal Image Spinner, he invited Chief Chirpa into his hut and used that magical device to show him a chilling vision of the destruction of the Death Star as an example of what Humans were capable of. Chief Chirpa con-

cluded that, indeed, the Humans were an evil and murderous race far worse than any Dulok or Yuzzem. Chirpa's address to his tribe was not a comfortable one, but the Ewoks had seen firsthand the damage the Empire was doing to their world.

So it was that when the Rebels were captured and brought to their village, Chirpa kept an uncomfortable silence when Logray ordered them cooked and eaten. Thanks to the prophesied Golden One, however, the feast of Rebel stew did not come to pass, and Chief Chirpa and the Ewoks came to learn that not all Humans were alike. They also were surprised to find that some could wield powerful magic like their shaman.

With their success at the Battle of Endor and the destruction of the second Death Star, the false-Logray thought he might best influence the tribe through Teebo and offered him the apprenticeship he'd earlier taken away. But Teebo had lost all faith in him and refused. Thinking Teebo needed time, Chirpa asked Paploo to learn what he could from Rakra of the Panshee tribe, which he reluctantly agreed to do.

But Wicket and Kneesa had begun to suspect that something was off with Logray. None of his recent actions made any sense. This wasn't the droll and kind-hearted Ewok they'd grown up with. And Kneesa remembered the old tricks Morag used to pull, including that of the Simon doppelganger. She devised a plan. Wicket didn't like the danger she'd be putting herself in, but he agreed that her idea had merit. Danger was nothing new for the young Ewoks, and something had to be done about Teebo, who remained distant and brooding. But as they'd grown older, Wicket had grown more circumspect and less reckless. He'd also come to see death in the recent war and didn't rush to welcome it or bring it upon those he loved. And he very much loved Kneesa.

Latara's job was to keep an eye on the false-Logray. While he went to market, Princess Kneesa would break into his hut. But she wouldn't have long. Logray came only for a few herbs and foodstuffs and avoided unnecessary conversation. That wasn't too hard since the Ewoks had grown wary of him. When he began making his way back to his hut, Latara intercepted him. She knew that he would see through small talk, so instead played the part of the hurt paramour, which was no great stretch, and she again demanded he explain himself as to the real reason he dismissed Teebo. Taken aback, he gave her the pat answers he'd long before given, but she wasn't having it. After going back and forth for a time, he began to sense that she was purposely keeping him engaged, and he raced back to his hut. There he found the Princess rummaging through his things.

"These are Morag's!" she charged after he burst in, not bothering to hide or feign innocence. "You've been using the Dark Rituals!"

Logray cornered Kneesa, now grinning hideously. "I will arrange your death so that it will be blamed on Teebo. That will surely put Chief Chirpa over the edge, allowing the Dark Rituals to become the way of life for Bright Tree Village."

But Kneesa and Wicket were far from the reckless youth they'd been. Weechee, Willy, and Deej—Wicket's brothers and father—burst into the hut wielding blowguns loaded with tranquilizer darts.

The maniacal Medicine Man was fast asleep before he knew what hit him.

Logray was immediately put on trial, but they could find no evidence that he was under an enchantment or someone else in disguise. As far as the village understood,

this *was* Logray. In punishment, he was exiled from Bright Tree Village with only the clothes on his back. But Latara remained unconvinced, and she now took up her part, one that she kept secret from the others.

MALANI MEETS THE DULOK PRINCESS

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For the early leg of her journey, Latara was unaware that she was being followed. Teebo's sister Malani knew that her brother's friends were up to something and had asked her comrade Salina to spy on them, and from her she'd learned that Latara was trailing Logray. When Latara finally caught sight of her, she ordered Malani back. But Malani was not a wokling any longer and remained impervious to her threats.

Unfortunately, Logray had also caught on that he was being followed, having detected the familiar whiff of Latara's perfume and deftly managed to shake her tail.

It was nearing midday when Latara and Malani came upon a young Dulok female of the Dhezern Tribe named Anaan who was filling up large jugs from a nearby lake. "What can I do for a fellow warrior?"

"Drop dead, maybe," Latara responded without stopping.

"*Latara!?*" Malani chastised, catching up with her friend after apologizing to Anaan. "That was rude!"

"Rude?!" Latara retorted angrily. "Have you forgotten the time you were abducted and almost eaten by King Vulgarr?"

"Well, no, but that was a long time ago."

"Why are you following us?" In a half-second, Latara had spun around, spear pressed against Anaan's neck. "Malani, you want some payback?"

Though surprised, Anaan remained still. "I'm aware our people have not always been on the best of terms. But your companion is correct. Vulgarr has been a tree for long years. Gorneesh is no more. And none know what became of his son Boogutt."

"Hopefully, he's at the bottom of a swamp somewhere!" Latara spat caustically.

"It is a new era on our world… Ever since your people defeated the 'Skull Ones,' the Ewoks are held in high-esteem by the Dulok tribes. I would prefer it if our people could set aside the past."

Latara's face was a mask of anger. "Look, you're young and probably don't remember what your *people* did to mine, but I want nothing to do with Duloks unless it's to dig a grave for your corpses."

Anaan nodded. "I see. Well, I wished only to help…."

"Wait!" Malani said. "Maybe you can. We're looking for an old Ewok that might have passed this way."

"I am sorry to say that I have seen no other Ewoks besides you this day," she replied courteously. Malani frowned at the dead-end, but before Latara could stalk off again, Anaan asked, "Why do you seek him out?"

"None of your business," Latara growled.

"He's an imposter and a bad man!" Malani started, ignoring Latara's grumbling. Latara then announced that she was going to the lake to refill their water canisters and made a point to tell Anaan that she was keeping an eye on her.

By the time she returned, Malani had filled Anaan in on the entire story. "It is a noble quest you are on," Anaan stated. "I agree that something is very wrong with this *Logray*. The Duloks know of possession and tulpas. Much of the history of our people involves traffic in the forbidden arts… what you call the Dark Rituals," she whispered. "But that is no longer. I know where he might be hiding. There is a network of caves at the foothills of Mount Thunderstone that are said to be haunted by the ghost of Morag. My sisters and I ventured there once, intending to prove ourselves as fearless as the males of the tribe…"

"We have the same problem!" Malani interjected.

The Dulok nodded soberly and continued, "What we uncovered was… unsettling. It was clear that dark magic had been practiced there. One could smell it in the air. We entered through a cave hidden by rocks and brush and, there, split into teams. While Cheela, Looysa, Jeen, and Na'ti went one way, Itaa, Delfi, and I went another. We found an interior alcove which held a strange catafalque. Inside it, an old Ewok stood as if in a trance. There was no sign of decay, so we knew he wasn't dead. I don't know if that is your Logray, but it is worth investigating." After giving them directions to the concealed cave entrance, she added, "I would join you on this quest if you would have me!"

"Absolutely not!" Latara declared fiercely. "For all we know, it's a Dulok trap!"

"*Latara!*" Malani intoned. "I apologize for her. We *could* use the help."

"I said *no*, and I meant it!"

"I promise you it is no trap," Anaan tried to assure her.

"I trust the word of a Dulok about as much as I trust a Skandit with a crate of nuts!" Latara rejoined. "Maybe we'll check out your story. Maybe we won't. But in either case, if I discover you following us, I *will* kill you!"

"Very well. It is your quest to follow. If you require my services, my tribe is not a klick east of here. Do not hesitate to ask for help if you need it."

Thanking her, Malani caught up to Latara already walking ahead. "We can't *not* check this out!"

"I know," Latara said grimly, moving in the direction Anaan had given.

Despite her past reputation as a self-absorbed and vain Ewok, following the deaths of her parents in the Dulok Reprisals, Latara had transformed into a formidable warrior. Despairing at feeling so helpless and angry at the Duloks but angrier at herself for not being able to protect her family, she went on to train under the legendary Asha, who she'd fought alongside at the Battle of Endor. Latara no longer felt helpless.

"Stay out until I call you!" she commanded Malani once they arrived. "I mean it!"

Latara entered the darkness of the cave mouth, focusing on her hearing while her eyes adjusted. Unfortunately, the simulacrum of Logray was ready for her.

A shadow moved at the same time that she heard laughter. A blaze of fur, ax drawn, she swooped in! Claws raking, teeth biting, Latara fought with the instinct and cold fury of a trained killer, but the magic of the false-Logray was not so easily repelled, and before long he had her imprisoned in a magical cage. She was grateful to see that Malani was nowhere to be found and had finally listened to her. Hopefully, she was halfway back to their village.

"You are, indeed, more than you appear," the false-Logray acknowledged with a mock bow. "I'm afraid, however, that that does not make you as valuable a hostage as the Princess would have been. Your people are nothing if not dutiful. Soon enough, they'll figure out where I am and come en masse. When they do, I'll be long gone, and the only thing they'll find is your corpse."

"You're *not* Logray!" she charged.

"Are you *just* figuring that out now?" The false-Logray chuckled. "Ewoks may be good fighters, but you're hardly formidable in the mental department."

"What are you talking about?" Latara charged. "You may not be Logray, but you're still an *Ewok*."

"In point of fact, I am not. I am a magical creation based on his genetic fiber. But if you think about it, I'm really an offspring of Morag the Magnificent—whom your people killed! And now, she will be avenged!"

Latara was determined to keep him talking, and this time it would mean her life if she failed. She could've chastised herself for not having told her friends of her quest, but she was tired of all the stories in which *they* were the heroes. *Perhaps the reason they were heroes was that they always stuck together*, she thought. *Funny time to learn that lesson*. "Morag? *Magnificent*? Are we talking about the same person?"

"You know not of what you speak! You call your precious Kneesa a Princess, but Morag was the daughter of a *Goddess*! In the forgotten days, she was Lindronnigen *and had fooled even your Season Deities!* Before that, she was the unstoppable Moragarom! The Wizards of the Night Spirit bowed to her as they did her Great Mother! O, that I would have lived in times as those when such awesome and incomparable darklings ruled the night!"

"Those are just stories she told you!" Latara shot back, spurring him to magically lift up her cage and hang it from a perch.

He grinned then with a hideous expression the true Logray had never used. "Do not think you can postpone me indefinitely. I care not what you believe."

"I get it," Latara responded, recovering quickly from her blunder. "You're going to kill me just like you killed the real Logray."

"Oh, he's not dead," the simulacrum revealed. "Sadly, the way Morag's spell works, the original must be kept alive—in stasis is fine so long as he remains amongst the living. Were there time, I would awaken him to watch you die. But I must prepare for my departure. And it is probably best that you not be kept around much longer. You Ewoks have a knack for getting out of scrapes."

A WARRIOR AND A WIZARD

"Since you're not Logray or even an Ewok," said a figure that seemed to melt out of the shadows, "I don't think you'll be getting out *this* scrape!"

"Teebo!" Latara had never been happier to see anyone in her life. "Free me so I can kick his butt!" Teebo hadn't forgotten all he'd learned over the years and in a flash had her released.

"Very well," the false-Logray said, simmering. "Let it be a test of wills then!"

Dazzling bursts of color and light exploded with a panoply of whizzing whistles and bangs. The tulpa-Logray had all of the original's magic but none of the experience. Meanwhile, Teebo was without his wand or powders. Thankfully, he had learned spellcraft well. Together with Latara's combat training, they nearly brought the simulacrum to his knees. Had anyone seen them in action, they'd have written songs of it, but tragically, it was not enough. Teebo and Latara were soon both in cages. "*Lurdo!*" she cursed at her adversary.

"It was fun while it lasted!" Teebo quipped. Despite the playful banter of old, Latara knew that, like her, he would never accept defeat.

"It'll be the last you have!" the false-Logray groused. "You've robbed me of precious time. I'll have to return later for my things, assuming your chief doesn't steal them. Perhaps he'll be too distracted by his daughter's tears when they find their best friends dead." The false-Logray took out a box. "Morag's enchanted dagger, one of many treasures she left behind after you killed her."

"We *didn't* kill her," Teebo and Latara protested, but he was long past listening.

He gingerly pulled the knife out, impressed by the impressions on the hilt, and turned to face the prisoners. "*Rise!*" The dagger levitated into the air. "Who shall die first?" The blade began to spin. It pointed at Latara. "Oh, I think *this* will be fun…"

"*Do not do this.*" It was a feminine voice that spoke. The startled Ewoks and their jailer scanned the room but saw nothing.

"Your tricks won't work on me, apprentice," the false-Logray fumed at Teebo.

"I had nothing to do with it!" Teebo remonstrated.

"He did not." The disembodied voice spoke again. This time it was clearly coming from inside the room. "I don't suppose you'd recognize me if you saw me." A form appeared of a pretty Amaran. She then sang a song that was so haunting, the false-Logray was forced to sit. Then the shape transformed into that of a familiar Frost Sprite he'd seen in the histories of the Crystal Image Spinner.

"It *cannot* be you!" he said when she'd finished. "You are… *dead!*"

"My spirit was taken by the forest and trees deep into the beating heart of the moon where I was made to see and know things I hadn't seen or known before. I was but a helpless figment of a thing, cold and weak and barely clinging to a semblance of what I had been… but I felt warmth such as I'd never before felt… and was *invited*. A tribe, the original tribe of this world, immemorial, loving, and wise, called to me."

"*You are not her!*" he screamed, his madness terrifying Latara in that moment.

"No, I suppose I am something else now, *someone* else, but I had been her long ago… So too is this opportunity I am offering you. You need not be a vengeful copy of someone else. You can be so much more. You have but a moment to decide, for I am departing to my ancestral home and my sisters…" Her form changed again into something frightening, but her visage remained peaceful, and she shimmered with an inner glow.

"NO! Leave me, spirit! I will avenge you—the *real* you!" He lifted up the dagger and walked over to Teebo with a look of utter hatred in his eyes. "*You* did this, *you* and your disgusting Ewok charms!"

Then, without preamble, a spear pierced him through the chest. He looked down at the protruding tip in horror and surprise. As he dropped to the ground, they saw

then that the spear had been thrown by the hands of Anaan. She and her sisters had been alerted by Malani who'd come to them for assistance. While Malani and Anaan untied Latara and Teebo, they turned to look at the specter, but whatever the spirit had been, she was no longer present.

"I'm sorry I said those things to you earlier," Latara said to the Dulok when she was free. "You really came through for us."

"I am ever at your service, Miss Latara."

Malani smiled, "Well, that sounds like the beginning of a great friendship!"

"Teebo," Latara finally asked, "*was* that some spell you cast?"

"No," he stammered. "Well, not exactly. I called out to the Soul Trees and asked the Great Spirit for help like I used to do when I was a small wokling."

"Do you think that was really… *her*?"

"I think we'll be wondering about that for the rest of our lives." Teebo smiled like he hadn't in a long time, and Latara saw in him the young and clumsy poet she'd fallen in love with. "How about we get back home? I have a lot of time to make up for."

"We both do," she said, grinning back at him as she reached across and kissed his lips. Teebo's eyes grew wide as they had the very first time she'd done that. "And you really must wash out that dye," she added. "I miss your old colors."

"So do I!" They held hands as they walked out of their former prison. "Let's find and free Logray—the real Logray!"

The Ewoks of Bright Tree Village could never have imagined it in a hundred years. A phalanx of Dulok warriors—some no older than what Wicket and his friends had been when they'd had their many adventures—were being led by Latara, Teebo, and Logray, not as hostages or prisoners but as rescuers and friends.

Anaan, who turned out to be the Dulok Queen, pledged a formal alliance with the Ewoks, citing a renewal of the ancient Spell of Seven Oaths that had once bound them in the long years before Morag corrupted Murgoob the Oracle and King Ilgo.

A great festival followed such as hadn't been seen in years too long to remember.

It wouldn't be until many years later, as he was nearing death, that Logray told Chiefs Kneesa and Warrick along with their steadfast companions, Teebo and his wife Latara, a complete account of his hidden history. For their part, they did not judge him. Relieved to have unburdened himself, Logray died in peace surrounded by his companions. The entire village mourned for a long time afterwards…

At last, the Soul Tree of Logray, upon which his hood had been placed, spoke to the four Ewok friends in their sleep. In their dreams, he appeared to them youthful and spry, and with a merry gleam in his eye, he said, "It's time to cease grieving and move on… There is yet work to be done; the Duloks are part of it, and the other lost tribes must be brought in, for Lesser Tana must be whole again for what is to come…" And young and old heeded his final message, and the trees and the mountains joined with the rivers and lakes to lift up their voices in song for a grand victory celebration.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-TWO

THE KINGDOM OF DREAMS

No easy thing is it to remember that the Sith were not always evil and that they had once been a noble race of artisans and builders. Nor had the Eruthros bloodline all become tainted by depravity. Benevolence still ran through the Tythans and M'ust, the latter of whom had escaped Drômenregn for Medriaas and Ventooine long before.

The M'ust of Ventooine had absailed into their new world of underground caverns, transforming grottos, ravines, and pools into baroque marvels of amethyst, beryl, and chalcedony wherein they remained as if troglodytes, using the Supernal Flame they called upon to power their chatoyant, subterranean civilization.[239]

The Guardians of the Flame engineered a race of beings from the rocks and called them the Cavus. Though they are now known by the rather disparaging name of Cavern Monsters, they are similar in appearance to their Cragorian or B'rknaa brethren but given a purpose both simple and challenging: to protect the M'ust from those who might seek to harm them. The Cavus were content to build a modest society above and fulfill their commission to guard the shafts and entrance zones to the world below. Millennia later, with the aid of Vor'cha stun sticks which penetrated armor and rendered interlopers unconscious, they kept the heathen Satabs far from their masters' domain without having to resort to deadly force.

Cody Sunn-Childe was among the very few to have gotten past the Cavus without even trying. While engaging in battle against Grand Inquistor Hydra and a battalion of shadow stormtroopers, Sunn-Childe was shot multiple times and fell, near upon death, into an unseen fissure that led down to the Sanctum of the Flame.

No ordinary flame was this that Sunn-Childe had fallen upon but the Holy Fane of the Eternal wherein the M'ust kept a sacred fire ever burning. The so-called "Enemy of the Empire" should have been immolated, but the Prelates who came whispering excitedly knew this was no accident. These were the Guardians of the Flame, who were made up of the twelve priestly rulers of the M'ust. They sent Prelate One, Sevend Tesrek; along with Prelate Two, Pyozic Brynner; Prelate Seven, Dirrach Hyladen; and Prelate Eleven, Anet Umbolo, to attend him and see to his battle wounds, which were extensive, though no scorch mark lay upon him.

When after several days Sunn-Childe regained consciousness, Prelate Tesrek told him all that had transpired, including his miraculous survival in the Sanctum of the Flame. Among his many questions, Sunn-Childe inquired as to who they were. The

[239] The Sith counterpart to the Supernal Flame burned for millennia on Korriban, where it is called the Eternal Pyre. Borne of the Old One known as the Living Flame, it serves destruction rather than healing.

Prelates introduced themselves and urged him to patiently recover before conversing at length, as sleep was crucial while good food and rest would take care of the rest.

When finally they spoke again, Sunn-Childe was vexed by all he heard, suspecting he'd been taken in by some bizarre cult. This was precipitated by their claim to have been alive for millennia. He was also indignant at their pacifist stance. He had little patience for delusions and even less for those who would not fight their own battles. Also, he suspected there was something they weren't telling him. Still, they had saved his life, and he felt honor-bound to offer them his aid against the Empire.

To his annoyance, they refused his protection and instead said that if he really wanted to assist them, he might make a spiritual sacrifice towards the establishment of peace. "In you," Prelate Tesrek explained, "Child of the Sun, we have glimpsed a mystic spark that might yet be ignited in fulfilment of the Prophecy of the Flame…"

Seeing as he was bewildered, Prelate Umbolo explained. "It is the time when the Children of Light arise to defeat the Children of Darkness and usher in a new galaxy…"

As Sunn-Childe still seemed bemused, Prelate Brynner added, "It is for this very reason that the Flame spared you."

At this, Cody Sunn-Childe laughed gustily. Gratitude was one thing, but it only took him so far, and scorn was the only response he could make to such mumbo jumbo. The Prelates smiled patiently and said he might come to understand in time. They asked one of the Cavus to show him to his quarters where he might rest.

It had been the talent of the Eruthros to shape worlds of great beauty, and many had they shaped before the umbra of iniquity swallowed them. Some surmised that this was why they'd been chosen long ago by the Dark Ones: to turn builders into destroyers. The supernal powers of the M'ust were yet intact, for they had not succumbed to the darkness and warily remained vigilant to avoid being found and coerced into misusing their gifts for evil ends, for which reason they'd hidden themselves away. In that time, they'd built a secret and magnificent civilization, ever mindful of the hope they carried with them. Now, with the Galactic Civil War thundering on their shores, many believed the prophecy's fulfilment had drawn near.

The M'ust had not expected Sunn-Childe to concede right away, for they knew that the cultural mores of the galaxy—filtered through the Dark Powers—were clouded; oftentimes that which was dissolute and false was celebrated while that which was virtuous and true was disparaged. Many lengthy conversations and debates followed while Sunn-Childe coalesced, often ending with the exasperated warrior storming off to the small but comfortable chamber they'd prepared for him.

"You wouldn't be here if warriors didn't fight for you!" Sunn-Childe snapped during the most recent debate.

"We have required no warriors in our long years," Prelate Tesrek said mildly.

"So you're content to just let evil take over while you hide underground."

"You cannot put out a fire by adding more fire."

Sunn-Childe took a deep breath. This was going nowhere. "You must realize that without us, tyrants would rule the galaxy."

"What happens when your side wins?"

"Well, a good government is put in place, a *just* one."

"Perhaps at the start this is true, but has not history shown us that this state does not long last? Soon enough, your *good* government turns corrupt, justice vanishes, and tyranny returns; and the violence that once drove out the old tyrants is now employed to keep the new ones in power. We have seen this played out time and again for millennia. Your way only adds suffering and death to the gaps in-between."

It annoyed him that they always seemed to have a calm answer to his pragmatic and iron-clad arguments. Though cunning in the boardroom and brilliant on the field of battle, Sunn-Childe was not what he considered a deep thinker. "My philosophy," he had several times said, "is that philosophy is for those who do not act." He realized that what rankled him the most was that there was a kernel of truth to the naïve pacifism that they preached. The teachings of the M'ust were not just intellectual anathema to Sunn-Childe; they challenged his very being. But were he to acknowledge that veracity, it would mean that he'd been a monster for most of his life and not the hero he was regarded as!

This battle of wits could not go on. He would not allow his honor to be undermined by the fallacies of credulous cenobites. He now marched back to the Chamber of Ecclesia where he'd just stormed out, past the placid Cavus that stood at attention, to tell them in no uncertain terms that, although he was grateful for their assistance, he was no longer going to continue their debates.

The Prelates said that they understood, and though they would miss their discussions, they would respect his wishes. Sunn-Childe walked away even more irritated at their willingness to concede but madder at himself for being such a coward.

Time passed, and Cody Sunn-Childe began to suspect that their healing salves were keeping him in an unhealed state, perhaps so that they could hold on to their "savior." So he began refusing any ministrations, save for the copious and hearty plants, fungi, and herbs they provided as food. *At least they can cook*, he thought, *even if I prefer the delicately roasted flesh of a freshly downed Tian-Ki or Granta-loupe*. When he once suggested, mainly in jest, that's he'd procure the latter for the M'ust, it was as if he'd said he wanted to bed their daughters and wives. "The M'ust revere *all* life," his server responded grimly before walking off.

Of course you do! "That should tell you right there that I'm not your Chosen One!"

Without the healing ointments, Sunn-Childe's wounds began to fester, causing him to fall into a kind of delirium in which he experienced fever dreams of being chased in an endless swamp by giant distorted versions of himself who chortled mockingly each time they grabbed him in their big clammy hands. Subsequent versions of the nightmare saw him dismembered, disemboweled, and cooked.

Crying out after one particularly horrific dream of this sort, Sunn-Childe begged for their healing potions. The M'ust menders applied their salves and chanted their irritating psalms, led as before by Prelate Hyladen who—to add insult to injury— was utterly tone-deaf, but now he didn't mind, for almost at once he began to feel better.

It took many months for him to gain back his strength, a time in which he ruminated on their hospitality, generosity, and overall contentment… a way of life that,

foreign and primitive as it was, could not but impress him. The peace and joy he daily witnessed and saw on their faces was so unlike the greed and desperation he recalled in those customers who'd come to the Wheel, the satellite casino he once owned; nor was it like the jaded and aggressive Rebel comrades he'd associated with. He wondered at the fates of Beelyard, Bel Iblis, Gerrera, and others. *Are they still around fighting the good fight? Or has the cause claimed them too? How long had it been since I'd felt anything but the hot desire to outwit and crush my rivals?*

Sunn-Childe was impressed as well by the structure of their civilization. Food grew in abundance, which they credited to the Supernal Flame—not the one he fell upon, but an artificial sun that provided their world light and heat. Workdays were relatively short. Food Minders tended to the taproots, tuberous roots, and other plants and fungi which made up the bulk of their diet. There were several types of Cave Minders, but the ones that interested him handled interior and exterior construction, safety, and expansion, all of which was treated less as labor and more as a kind of art. Other *art* forms were adopted by those called Tale Minders, who collected and wrote literature and painted great works on the cave walls, and Culture Minders, who organized the various games, sports, and activities that challenged the mind and body and yet were not competitive as those in the outside world. There were even Beast Minders for the various types of odd fauna that lived amongst the people as if equals, with duties that included the taming of potentially dangerous animals.

As to the Cavus that attended him, he'd made a false assumption about their nature and hadn't even bothered to ask their name, which he now discovered was Barrbaxes of the Jerna Clan. Needless to say that Sunn-Childe was amazed to hear laughter at the suggestion that their people were anything other than freeborn. In clear but halting Basic, Barrbaxes said, "My people and the M'ust are as one. We are fond of them as they are of us. Without them, we would not be alive, but it is for this mutual love that we remain and help where we can."

"And if you wish to leave?"

"Several have—restless spirits—gone to see what is out *there*," Barrbaxes said, pointing upwards.

In fact, no resident was forced to stay. Occasionally, youthful M'ust wished to leave to explore the outside world or establish clans of their own, and this was celebrated in the Ceremony of Parting. Most returned, often with wild stories, keeping the Tale Minders busy recording their adventures. Of those who had families, which were generally small, tutors known as Skill Minders were kept occupied as well. There was no violent crime amongst the M'ust; thieves and other lawbreakers were sent for rehabilitation to the Mind Menders, but this was a rare occurrence.

Perhaps the group that astounded Sunn-Childe the most were the Guardians of the Flame. He'd assumed that most if not all religious orders existed almost entirely to attain wealth and power. But here, the Prelates received no compensation and lived as all the rest lived, serving in their roles mainly to provide spiritual guidance, ensure peace, and administer impartial justice where required, for which reason the Prelates did not produce offspring. This ensured they would not fall into tribalism, favoring

one family-group over another. If a Prelate chose (or happened) to have a child, however, he or she would step down and be replaced by a suitable candidate.

Sunn-Childe saw the appeal to living in such a society, and it was this that made up his mind to leave at last. Sympathize though he might, he could not give in to the temptation of living a pastoral life—not while the Empire still thrived out there.

On the morning in which Sunn-Childe was to depart, there was a bustle of activity. No one would give him a direct answer as to what was going on, but from their sly smiles, he assumed they were preparing one of their Parting Ceremonies for him. As touching as that was, he was anxious to return to the galaxy beyond.

Approaching the Chamber of Ecclesia so that he could say goodbye, he was surprised to hear unusual strains of music emanating from it. There was no door to the chamber, and as he drew closer, he could see the twelve members immersed in some kind of harmonious instrumental. He detected a quadro, oud, and vandfill, which Prelate Brynner played. Prelate Umbolo strung a kithara, Tesrek harmonized on a melodium, and Hyladen just clapped along, grinning blithely. Sunn-Childe stood listening for some time until the song was complete.

"I understand it is a bit removed from the more sophisticated arrangements played in the galaxy today," said Prelate Umbolo, "but I hope you enjoyed it."

"I was never a great lover of music," Sunn-Childe admitted, "though my mother was. That one was a popular arrangement from… uh, the Neutron group, Starship of J'ffer's Sons, isn't it? But… you couldn't possibly know that down here."

"We may be isolated," smiled Tesrek, "but that does not mean we're insular. We have ways of keeping abreast of the outside world…"

"I suppose that makes sense. But *Neutron*? Why?"

"We believe that almost all music comes from the Supreme Maker," Umbolo said as he put his instrument away. "Did you know Neutron was named after Neutron Pixie spice? It's similar in many ways to Isotope but more focused on long improvisations and the experience of psychedelia akin to what Neutron Pixie users experience."

"It is important to find joy in life," Brynner stated, "for it is the main reason we were put here. The composition is called 'Light the Sky on Fire,' and it deals with the return of the Architect Kopa Khan. Given his rather dark role in the Cosmic Wars, the piece is considered somewhat taboo by a few of our people…"

"For which reason we play it only in private," winked Umbolo, causing the others to chuckle, "on those rare occasions we get together."

"Don't want to offend your flame-god, I suppose," Sunn-Childe joked.

Prelate Brynner shook his head, mildly exasperated. "We have not done our due diligence if that is what you think!"

Tesrek picked up the thread, "It is *not* a flame-god we worship, Cody Sunn-Childe; the flame is a literal and symbolic representation of the spirit of the One who will purify all things and eradicate evil for all time. I would go on, but I fear these concepts touch on subjects of a nature you have asked us not to speak on."

"Whatever you say, Pera, but for what it's worth, I think my parents would have enjoyed your rendition very much!" Sunn-Childe smiled wistfully. "It's been a long time since I thought of them."

"Speaking of time, is it already the day of your departure?" asked Umbolo.

"I'm afraid it is," Sunn-Childe started.

"And yet, I sense you have a question," Prelate Brynner probed.

"I do. I'm curious about something." When he felt assured that he wouldn't be rebuffed for being nosy, he continued. "Have you always lived this way? I don't mean underground… but as *peacefully* as you do. I've traveled quite extensively but have never seen anything like this."

Tesrek looked to his companions, who nodded. Inviting him to sit with them, they began to tell him the story of their past on Dromund Kaas which they had not previously revealed to him. Sunn-Childe listened in utter amazement. He hadn't expected *that*—that these people, who could not be more culturally dissimilar from the Sith, were of the same original race. It was unimaginable!

"Seductive as Sith rhetoric is," Tesrek began, "it always proves to be a denial of reality on every level. Its advocates that anger, frustration, and struggle fuel empowerment, but that is a lie; biologically, spiritually, and psychologically, it merely hastens corruption and death. What are Sith worlds but places of misery and decay? The inclination toward self-aggrandizement, violence, and paranoia cannot help but to be a recipe for failure and self-destruction."

"Only in their propaganda is that not the case," Hyladen added. "Sith leadership requires a misled and angry populace that blames others, like the Jedi, for their ills."

Brynner continued: "The Jedi of old kept their identity in death as they became one with the eternal Force. The Sith seek to prevent such a thing, considering oneness to mean the dissolution of self, which makes them fragile in ways Jedi are not. Desperately they struggle to extend their lives on the physical plane and, to that end, employ a macabre combination of science and magic to keep animate their corpses, bind their spirits to physical objects or transfer them to other living vessels—all forms of demonic necromancy contingent on the temporal. The so-called immortality that they dangle is a lure built on ancient serpentine sorcery that exists for the very few who have traded life for a bizarre and monstrous kind of unlife. The entire crux of their belief-system falls apart when one sees that the greatest of their achievements is to be as tortured, predacious specters."

"Here's where I have a theological problem," Sunn-Childe replied. "If this Cosmic Force that you speak of is true, why doesn't it utterly reject them?"

"It is more complex than that. The Living Force is generated by living beings, but designed by the Cosmic Force to partner with them and obey their commands; when the galaxy was in harmony with the Will of the Cosmic Force, life and joy abounded. But the Grieving came, and the galaxy turned to fear, anger, and hate, and so the Living Force suffered as did the galaxy. And part of its corruption came from the Anti-Force. Where the Force binds, the Anti-Force unmoors and imbalances, but that

is because it too is weak. Like its unholy masters, its power is gained through theft, through the suffering of billions, for their fear, anger, and hate feed it.

"Yet, the Living Force is as vast as the cosmic seas and despite its wounding and weakening, it yet maintains great power. So it is that the Force can be said to have a light and dark side, but that is not its natural or original state, nor is it the will of the Father of Lights, but since that is what it has become, so must its users choose to abjure the taint, corruption, and self-aggrandizing will, recognizing that in the power of the Dark Side, which hinges on negative states, there is no real strength, only the illusion of it foisted by the weak and wicked in their displays of rule and ruin."

"All the more reason to fight the Empire," Sunn-Childe declared, "who is led by a Sith Lord."

"That is very much our intent!" Prelate Hyladen expostulated.

"You've spent all this time trying to convince me of the rightness of pacifism, and now you say you want to fight?"

"There are other ways besides violence in which to fight," Umbolo returned. "Look at the galaxy today. Is there anything sadder or more contemptible? What cruelty there is! What blindness! What apathy and greed! Confounded creatures colliding recklessly against each other, driven by an orgy of brutality and self-indulgence. Your blasters and ships cannot stop this, but the time is coming when this madness *will* spend itself; when lust for power and wealth will perish by its own sword, devouring all in its swathe. And so it will take a warrior to show the futility of war… for the galaxy will look for a better way. It is our belief that they would find it with *you*!"

"Why with *me*?" he started. "I'm not a believer in any of this."

"There is no more we can *tell* you," Umbolo responded, "but we can *show* you something if you can spare us a few moments before you leave us."

There were twelve large communities of M'ust in the underground world of Ventooine and a Guardian for each of them. Travelling to each community could be quite time-consuming on foot, so they employed Sureggis and friendly Pygmy Rancors for lengthier journeys. Annually, all of the M'ust gathered in the Great Grotto, their most expansive subterranean cavern located in the realm of Prelate One, the original home of the M'ust when first they'd arrived on Ventooine and made it their home.

Many great qualities did the remnant of the Eruthros possess, but punctuality was not amongst them, and M'ust continued to enter the Great Grotto over the course of the next few hours. During this time, they were repeatedly greeted by friends from distant communities, for which reason it took the Prelates an hour just to escort Sunn-Childe to his seat nearest to the center of the massive cavern where, within a simple but elegant chancel, burned what a smaller version of the Supernal Flame.

At a questioning look from Sunn-Childe, Prelate One explained, "This is a different flame set aside for a different purpose. We will tell you more later." At last, they settled and began singing and playing music. It was somewhere between a chant and winding ululation, for it contained an admixture of joy and lamentation.

We are the Guardians of the Flame
Keepers of the Sacred Rite

Our onus was long ago ordained
To defend the Realm of Light

Then, as if the Flame itself possessed a voice, music sweet and haunting soared from it. As Sunn-Childe grew more and more entranced with it, a vision emerged in his mind, clear and strong, of the Empyrean Wars in the latter part of the Primeval Age when the first shadow struck. How he knew this, he couldn't tell. He just knew.

Many things were shown, but the horrors and misery were touched with a measure of such poignancy that Sunn-Childe, who'd participated in so many battles he'd lost count, felt pained. For a long time afterwards, he felt crushed by the great horror of that thing which he'd once so vehemently defended and even gloried in, which he so often justified as necessary and good but only now saw as terrible and perverse. It was not the defense of the innocent that he regretted, though he now recognized that such was but a very small part of his engagements, but the fact that he'd been driven by an appetite for vengeance, a lust to bring pain and death to the enemy, irrespective of who that enemy was or whether they were truly evil or if it could have been averted… and this dark desire was shared by all who followed him into battle.

It was with resolve that Sunn-Childe now addressed the Prelates, who took him back to their chamber. "There was something you asked of me when first I arrived," he started, "something I did not understand but cruelly scorned. If I am still worthy of that, I would ask that I grant you this boon. I cannot undo all the harm that I've done—which I've long been in denial of—but perhaps I can balance the scales."

"You must not offer this unless you are certain," Umbolo stated, "and not in payment for any debt you feel to us, for we hold you in no such debt."

"Nor out of sheer sentiment over what you have just experienced," Brynner noted.

"It is true we had hoped you would come to see and understand what it is we first asked of you," Hyladen concluded, "but your decision must be based on knowledge and the desire to do good, for emotions pass, but wisdom endures. For this reason do we annually view the Visions of the Flame."

"There is much yet we do not know," Tesrek added, "but we believe you will be given a gift from which considerable good will come. The Supernal Flame has chosen you. But there is no guarantee that you are indeed your namesake…"

"There are no guarantees in this life," Sunn-Childe declared. "Whatever it takes, I will do. I see now for the first time that which is noble and that which is refuse. I have been seeing it the entire time I was here, but out of pride I refused to acknowledge it. I had thought you irrational and foolish, but it was I who had been. I am not a being of contemplation but of action, but if there is something, anything, I can do to promote the cause of peace, I must. I can no longer continue as before."

"I was once like you," Prelate Hyladen stated. "I had left this world for the one above, for the *freedom* I thought it offered. I even took on another name, forsaking the ways of the M'ust, who I scorned as antiquated dupes. It took many years and hard lessons before I learned otherwise." With a rueful shake of his head, he departed to speak to the M'ust still congregated in the Great Grotto, and in a short time, Sunn-

Childe began to hear the echoes of their invocation as he was led to the Holy Fane of the Eternal which he had not seen since first he fell upon the flame there.

Now, he was asked to step once more upon the large fiery dais that was the Sanctum of the Flame. Sunn-Childe's initial reaction was fear. No one spoke as he willed himself to be calm. *They would not have bothered bringing me back to health only to kill me*, he tried to convince himself. *Or would they?*

"I understand your reluctance," acknowledged Tesrek, "for it is no small thing that you do. But it saved you once before. Recall too that your injuries were not from the Flame but the events that preceded it."

Sunn-Childe laughed at his timidity. Here was the "Enemy of the Empire," who'd been in battles too many to recall, trembling in terror. This was a day for intense experiences. He looked at each of the Prelates in turn, half-expecting to see them exulting ominously, but intuiting only their somber patience.

He nodded his head. "Alright then… here goes nothing!" They began then to sing their supplicating chant. Owning his fears and with a deep breath, he stepped into the roaring flames… and began to burn!

He had not felt heat when first he fell upon the flames, and he did not now, but there was a burning sensation of *another* kind, of something indefinable and alive surging through his arteries and veins. It was a kind of ebullience he hadn't experienced since he'd been a boy, a charge of energy and joy and strength. At the same time, the decades of frustration, rage, and unconscious anxiety that he'd hardly known existed flowed out of him like so much draff.

Now he understood that what the fire burned away were the falsehoods, misery, and stories he'd told himself to make himself feel smarter and better than the ignorant herd. He understood too that when others lashed out, it was because they were in pain and confusion or in the thrall of those who craved after riches and power that they didn't deserve and weren't entitled to. So too did he see clearly his own motives and the ways in which he'd turned small injustices perpetrated on him in his youth on Jashwa into a crusade of violence. "Child of the Sun," he could hear the Prelates chanting, "the Supernal Flame has chosen you, granting you wisdom and power to bring the galaxy's ancient hopes and dreams to life."

The man who emerged from the Flame was not the same man who'd first fallen into it. Cody Sunn-Childe was born anew. He now rose into the air, the fissure opening up above him as he floated up to the surface. He had not seen the upper world for a long time, but that was not what concerned him. Bloated and skeletal bodies of Imperials and Rebels lay strewn about the ground, torn open and stinking of death. Some had been picked apart by hungry native fauna, but most had ruptured from blasters, bombs, and long days in the heat. His resolve grew stronger as he witnessed the hideous waste of life. *How had I not seen this before? How had I continually participated and reveled in these horrors?*

He discerned now that his friends had survived—not all of them but many—and he knew where to find them. But first, he had a mission. From the depths of his soul and newfound power he poured out a vision. In agony and bliss, he shaped a paradisiac

realm, a magnificent garden-metropolis drawn from the Realm of Dream, filtered through the millennial reveries of the M'ust as granted him by the Supernal Flame.

It manifested itself within a dwarf dimension as a domed, flat island within which stood the corporeal expression of exquisite longing and desire, a veritable Kingdom of Dreams, a restoration of a world once known and lost. Ringing the outskirts of the city was a dense jungle alive with the unsettling eyes of hungry predators desperate but unable to enter. Their presence was the dream-world's one condition, and he did not know if it was endemic to the place, a creation of his own subconscious, or something from the Flame.

As if by instinct, the M'ust arrived. Sunn-Childe announced a grand celebration in their honor. Never before had this people enjoyed so many festive and gay splendours, glorious foods, amusements, and music. Sunn-Childe, himself sheathed in a caftan of beryl, gold, and lapis-lazuli, had no recollection of ever having had so pleasant a time.

While the festival continued, the Guardians of the Flame followed Sunn-Childe up the winding, dolomite steps to the topmost tower at the center of the city in the district of Oneiron, marveling at the spectacular scenes of beauty around them. "I hope you know," said Prelate Tesrek with a mischievous smile, "that as powerful as you've become, you are not a god."

"Thank the Maker for that!" retorted Sunn-Childe, and though he said it jovially, he could not have been more serious. "Those creatures in the jungle… I've dreamt of them before. They would consume me if they could."

Hyladen peered out at them and shivered. "It is good that you can see them. They will wreak havoc if they can. Yet, they will remain in the jungles surrounding the city where they can do no harm unless invoked."

"They are the manifestation of the iniquity that yet resides within you which cannot at this time be destroyed but only controlled." Umbolo revealed. "You and all who come to dwell in this new realm will have to be taught to bridle your negative emotions and actions. *That* is the cost."

"And I believe the realm will grow as more are invited," Prelate Brynner added.

"But if I or another slip up?" Sunn-Childe asked, a note of disquiet entering his otherwise joyous heart.

"You will, of course!" Tesrek said this with a chuckle. "But you and they will learn how to draw them back into you and confine them again to the jungles. But beware: if too many escape before they can be confined, this kingdom will fall."

"But you and the others will be here to assist me. Won't you?" Sunn-Childe said uncertainly, for he detected a note of sorrow and parting in their countenances.

"I'm afraid not," intoned Tesrek.

"As much as it would please us to remain here with you," continued Brynner, "this was never meant for us, but for the denizens of the galaxy so that, as you earlier stated, the scales may perhaps be balanced."

"But I can still visit you in your homes?" Sunn-Childe asked, fearing he wouldn't care for the answer. He had grown quite fond of these people.

"This is but the fulfilment of *one* prophecy," Umbolo said. "There are others. We follow the will of the Force—not steer it to our liking. You were called by the Super-

nal Flame as were we. None know if you are the ultimate Chosen One or just one who has been Chosen—of which there have been many over the long years."

"And to what were *you* called?"

"You remember the Supernal Flame in the Great Grotto?" Tesrek asked.

"How could I forget?" Sunn-Childe wondered what this had to do with anything.

"It does not only reveal visions. It is a portal to the world of Ydmos, a land that exists in Illathurion."

"I don't know what that is," he admitted.

"You know of it as Otherspace," Hyladen explained. "This dimension was designed as a Night Realm, but it was not evil and did not become contaminated until the incursion of the Hellworlds and their denizens. The music of the Singing Flame will blaze up high, calling to beings from across Illathurion and even to worlds beyond, opening hidden portals for them to find. Some say it draws people like moths to an immolating flame. But for those who hear the music within, they are drawn because there is yet life and love within them. And so will they be rescued from the horrors that are soon to stir again in that realm, forces seeking to destroy and feed their insatiable lusts, hideous beings beyond imagining from the most ancient wars. In visions we have seen terrible grey fortresses of concrete and steel that will come upon Ydmos to destroy the light that blazes there."

"So, you're going to this world where this flame will call forth people from around Otherspace? To what end? Is it gathering an army to fight these *fortresses*?"

"No," Brynner clarified. "As you and the Supernal Flame created *this* world, so does the Singing Flame take them to *another*, a dimension very similar to your dream realm. But it also purges those who pass through it of their inner darkness, filtering out the dross so that the more time one spends there, the more one is freed from all the bitterness, hate, and vile avarice that have plagued the outside world. And from this inner-dimension is a passageway to another… a greater, unseen realm."

"Then why do we not all journey to this Ydmos now?"

"The city of the Singing Flame was made by the Valdilar to rescue the lost and the longing, the dreamers of lands forsaken, but it too is but a prelude to a larger event."

Prelate Umbolo sought to reassure him, "Our Dream City, our Drômenregn, has been reborn from you to rescue the peoples of Skyriver. Once you and your own master the art of living here, spread the word to all who would leave behind the madness of a galaxy at constant war. In so doing will the City of Dreams grow—"

"—to become a *Galaxy* of Dreams," Tesrek exclaimed.

Sunn-Childe felt too elated to be upset, but he was baffled once again and saddened that these friends that he'd just made were leaving him already for strange parts unknown. *Just when I'd gotten used to all of this!* he thought. But he knew that this was the way of things. In war, even ones waged with the weapons of peace, there was loss and precious little time to relax, and you learned to be stoic as people came in and out of your life. He hesitated, fearing to say the words. "And if I fail?"

"Live not in fear, for the City is a type, a forerunner, and no one person can stop what you have helped set in motion, for one day, it will lead all who seek it, as is the way of love…"

Cody Sunn-Childe did not fully understand, but he got the substance of it, and that was enough. He said a tearful goodbye to his teachers and companions. The celebration lasted a week, and once it was over, the M'ust returned to their underground world from where they would disappear from these shores forever.

Sunn-Childe's next task was at hand. He appeared before his old friend, Ansible Beelyard, the so-named "Holy Terror," and several other comrades. They were amazed and even a little afraid to see Sunn-Childe not only alive but profoundly altered. He provided them sustenance and told them of all that had transpired in the many months he'd lived underground. They did not believe him at first, and he laughed at their incredulity, remembering his own. He then took them to the Aperture of the City of Dreams, and as their mouths dropped in awe, he escorted them in.

Their transformative joy gave him even more joy than he'd previously felt. As soon as they'd settled and learned the rules, Sunn-Childe called telepathically to others, inviting them to leave behind their lives of desperation and come live with him in paradise. Many dismissed the vision, but some heeded the call and came to Ventooine where the portal to the Kingdom of Dreams lay open for them.

So the city grew as foretold and for long years flourished in an abundance of peace and happiness. Yet, any time the denizens of that marvelous city failed to keep their darker emotions in check, baleful manifestations of their inner darkness arose as immense and destructive titans. In time, however, they learned to master their harmful impulses and helped one another in this regard.[240]

Then the day came when the Galactic Empire arrived.

Lando Calrissian discovered the Kingdom of Dreams at this time and tried to warn his old hero, but as has been told in his own account, he remained skeptical and incensed at this unrecognizable person who refused to take up arms against his adversaries. It was only at the end, as Sunn-Childe gave into his negative emotions, that the creatures came forth as portended. But even in this, Sunn-Childe proved his integrity, laying down his life for the cause of peace. At last, Calrissian comprehended all that he'd accomplished, how his corporeal Dream was no mere phantasy of the mind or withdrawal from reality, but a physical and metaphysical manifestation of a state of mind that would come to encompass the entire galaxy for those who would set aside their hate. Though some would scoff, Calrissian would go on to tell everyone he knew of the great Cody Sunn-Childe and his wondrous Kingdom of Dream.[241]

And so the dreams of Sunn-Childe's spread, sparking hope in the hearts of many. In this way, the Prophecy of the Flame served as a precedent and archetype for the Prophecy of Restoration, the promise of that other-dimensional kingdom that would be the cornerstone and pattern of the New Universe to come, wherein Cody, arrayed in beryl, gold, and lapis-lazuli, awaits at the Aperture to greet all who arrive.

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[240] This is akin to the healing ritual of the Voss mystics, in which the Force walker enters the Realm of Dream to battle his inner demons made manifest. (This ritual was perverted by Darth Nox).

[241] Out of concern that his testimony would undermine the Rebellion's goals, Calrissian's account was altered by the historian who'd published it to portray Lando as hostile to Sunn-Childe's philosophy. This angered Calrissian who then refused to provide future reports. It was corrected several years later.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-THREE

IN THE TEMPLE OF DARKNESS

THE LONG JOURNEY OF THE NIGHTSISTER

Darth Dreadwar's failure to escape Nilrebmah XIII had cost him over four millennia of wasted time in a deathlike sleep, but a short time after the defeat of Emperor Palpatine over the moon of Endor, the stars aligned again, and he learned of the Witches of Dathomir.

Dreadwar's holocron had come into the possession of Exar Kun, who'd liberated it from the Dark Lord's tomb, from which it passed to Atris, the Jedi Council, Darth Ruin, the Black Sun Syndicate, Jabba the Hutt, and finally the crimelord Tyber Zann, who, after stealing it from Jabba, tried several means of probing its secrets, all in vain, until he concluded that a more experienced hand was in order.

With the Dread Mother integrating with Mother Talzin, the Nightsisters began growing in influence and power, for which reason the jaundiced and wary Sidious betrayed them and ordered her execution during the Clone Wars. Talzin had sacrificed much of her own strength to keep her grandson Maul from death after his bifurcation at the hands of a Jedi, and she was near upon completing the ritual that would put her spirit in Count Dooku when General Grievous impaled her. Yet her dark spirit ranged on, corrupting Gethzerion as she had earlier Zalem, prompting Palpatine to have the planet blockaded and many of the Nightsisters imprisoned during the Galactic Civil War.[242]

But for Tyber Zann and his Talortai Lieutenant, Urai Fen, releasing one of these was little more than a day's work. With considerable Imperial blood spilt, they extracted Silri, one of the leaders of the Nightsisters, and offered her a deal: pry open the secrets of the holocron or go back to prison.

Silri could be hotheaded, but she knew the Dathomiri were going to need allies abroad. These mercs and pirates were not them, but, as it turned out, she was also a good bluffer. The holocron was a marvel, but its mysteries were far too precious for Zann, Fen, or their thugs. After tinkering with it for a time, she told them that it contained important star charts from centuries ago, which she displayed before her ever-suspicious "allies." But Zann was no easy mark. Knowing her loyalty lay with her people alone, he threatened to wipe out all of the Nightsisters if she lied to him.

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[242] Talzin had been betrayed by her spoiled and ambitious daughter Kycina, who offered Maul—Talzin's favorite—to Sidious. Kycina's own account differs considerably, deceptively portraying herself as the heroine trying to protect her son from becoming a Nightbrother in Talzin's grasp.

Upon the deaths of Darth Vader and the Emperor, Zann's Consortium went on their most important raid yet: the theft of the *Eclipse*. Silri knew this would provide her the perfect opportunity to escape, and while they were busy pirating, she would go about unlocking the next layer of the holocron.

What it revealed couldn't be ignored. Nor could Zann be allowed to have it. Stealing a RZ-52 Dekard transport, she followed a trail to Nilrebmah XIII, hoping to gain a prize that would give her power enough to eliminate Zann and control the Consortium. With its ships and resources, she could restore her people to their rightful place.

On Nilrebmah XIII, Silri uncovered Dreadwar's army entombed in the carbonite and smokestone that kept them from rotting into detritus. Rousing the unsettling skeletons from slumber, Silri watched in pleasure as their ancient armor and ragged banners marched under the authority of their new mistress. Only then did she deal with the Dread Monolith and the suspended but yet-conscious Dark Lord that haunted it.

For a long while she considered leaving the spirit imprisoned there. Dealing with Sith was not a task one embarked on lightly. And from the stories she'd heard, their spirits were worse; most were mad to some degree; often they demanded absolute fealty. Neither held much appeal for her, but the reward could be worth the risk since only he himself could delve into the next layers of the holocron. From what little she saw already, this Dreadwar seemed different from other Sith she'd read about. But in the event he proved *difficult*, she had a few surprises to bring to bear.

"You are neither Sith nor Jedi, but something *else*," Darth Dreadwar croaked.

"Let me be clear: I am a Nightsister. I have no desire to join you, apprentice under you, or deal with your bat-kark crazy nonsense. I will release you in exchange for the secrets you put in this holocron. You can then do as you please. I don't care."

"I see, *Nightsister*. You must have considerable power to have awoken my army."

"*Former* army! And if you think of betraying me, know that I'll destroy you without a second's hesitation. I am no primitive shamaness. You may not yet be accustomed to the modern galaxy, but the era of natives bowing before you as a god is long gone."

"Good!" he hissed. "Then, at least, there has been *some* progress. I shall give you what you desire… on *one* condition."

"Here we go," she spat. "You heard my terms. I *won't* repeat them!" Her skeleton army drew nearer.

"I will gift you my holocron—"

"I already have that," she replied. *This Dreadguy might be a little crazy after all.*

"—and unlock its deepest secrets for you…"

Here comes the catch. "What's the condition?" she demanded.

"Take me to the throneworld of the Sith."

Silri didn't like it. Taking him anywhere was risky. And had she stolen a corvette instead of a transport, she could have brought her new army with her. Still, she had another ace up her sleeve that he didn't know about, and she reasoned that if you didn't gamble big, you didn't win in this universe. "There are no Sith left. Darth Vader and Sidious… y'know, the guys who ruled this universe, they're dead."

"There are… *others*."

"There *always* are," she said mordantly. "I assume you've got some kind of Sith-sense to lead us there."

"Yes… Deep in the heart of Forbidden Space—"

"I don't know what that means."

"You know it as the Unknown Regions…" he clarified.

Of course, that's where they would be! "Fine!" she said after a minute. "But it's a long journey, and I'll expect you to unlock this thing *before* I drop you off."

As Dreadwar was still tethered to his Monolith, Silri tried a workaround that the Nightsisters knew of. She had her Rancor, Cuddles, break off a small chunk of the tower and carry it onto her ship. All she needed to do then was *convey* his spirit from the larger body to the lesser one. Successfully transferred, Silri prepped for takeoff, whispering something to the creature that Dreadwar couldn't hear. He got the sense of it. She wouldn't need to call upon the Rancor. He had no interest in the girl, save for her ability to get him to the heart of the Sith Empire. Once he was in power again, he would seek out these *Nightsisters* and go about recruiting them.

After she had engaged the hyperdrive, she turned to the dark spirit. "Ok, time to fess up. How do you unlock the rest of this thing? And don't think you can lie to me. I've dealt with Sith before." This was itself a lie, but he didn't know that.

"You are the daughter of a great sorceress," Dreadwar started. "It is she who gave you your knowledge and anger!"

Silri frowned. "Flattery isn't going to distract me. I asked you a question!"

"What fool would I be to give you the answer until we've reached our destination?"

He was right. She could easily jettison the stone that he was attached to or have Cuddles smash it into dust. Fair enough. She'd go along with it for now. "Fine. Yes, my mother is the Nightsister Queen."

"What do you know about how the Witches of Dathomir began?"

"Six hundred years ago. Allya. A former Jedi. Exiled to Dathomir—"

"That is not the *start* of the Witches, but rather their *return*!"

"Ok," she sighed. "I'll bite."

"I will tell you some of the ancient history of the galaxy if you will share with me some of this… *modern* history."

As it seemed like a fair enough trade, she agreed, though she suspected she'd end up doing most of the talking. In this she was wrong. Dreadwar told her of the Paecian Empire, Morn's exiles on Dathomir, and of the most ancient legends of the Sith and their war with the powerful female sorceresses who once led them: "It is said that the very first Witch-Queen, known as the Dread Mother, now haunts Dathomir, and that is was she who repelled the maxichlorian monster and exiled the six-armed serpents, and she who aided Allya in achieving her goals, from which come your Nightsisters."

"We know of the Dread Mother, though we refer to her as the Crone. That's more of my mother's area of interest. While I respect her Book of Shadows, it's the future of our clans that most interests me. That's the reason I agreed to depart Dathomir with Zann. But you asked me about the modern state of the galaxy…" Silri was reluctant to divulge too much about her people. While she didn't think there was much that his ghost could do, the Nightsisers were wise enough to be cautious with dark spirits.

The picture Silri painted was of a galaxy he did not recognize, one in which the Sith had been neutralized or left as tattered remnants of ancient strains, leaving the greatest conglomeration of power deep in hiding on Rhand. The Republic and their Jedi were not quick to jump at shadows and, failing to see a consistent pattern, dismissed any isolated events as the bitter last gasps of defeated cultists, which was exactly as the True Sith expected they would.

It proved a lengthy trip and the most difficult one she'd ever made. There were not a few times that Silri considered jettisoning the Dark Lord and turning around, but she gritted her teeth and steeled herself as Dreadwar and his holocron navigated past bizarre space sinkholes, singularity traps, and other anomalies that would have frozen them or ricocheted their ship across the galaxy.

Though she hid it well, the horror she felt in this region was unlike anything she'd previously experienced. It was like swimming through an ocean of nightmare. She initially suspected that Dreadwar was doing something to her, but Cuddles could see it too. She forced herself not to look out the viewports as she soared past things that were impossible in any reality she knew of—giant faces in the stars, throngs of twisted things that pressed against the transparisteel, flapping, floating, rolling monstrosities of such immensity, they could not be. Dreadwar prattled on with some convoluted rational explanation of the phenomena that seemed anything but. She asked questions to try and make sense of what he was saying, but after a few minutes of his incomprehensible technobabble, she just rolled her eyes and ignored him.

After what seemed an eternity, they reached Rhand and the Temple of Darkness on the outskirts of the Black City upon the shores of the Crimson Sea. Sourly, Silri noted that under the noxious, sallow skies the waters indeed ran red. "I have made you a promise," he said to his pilot, "and to it, I hold true. My holocron is now unlocked for you and you alone." Not one to easily trust, even in the best of times, she tested it, quickly unlocking layer upon layer. Once he saw that she was pleased, he continued, "Do with it what you will. But do not linger here. Those that walk this plane are not *kind* to strangers. I have cloaked this ship as a precaution, but the allure will not last very long and will not fool the more powerful amongst them."

"I still have to bring your stone," she reasoned grimly, "or you're stuck with me."

"No need. On a world so steeped in the Dark Side as this, I am no longer tethered to an object. You have my thanks. Perhaps I will see you again."

Not if I can help it! she thought, but instead said, "Hope you find what you're looking for."

As the old wraith departed the craft, surveying from his empty hood the dim wastes of Rhand, Silri took off, eager to put as much distance between her and the living fossil as possible. But leaving would not be as easy as arriving. The world was like a wilful presence, grasping, delusive, and enervating, seeking to enter into her. Cuddles cried and growled like a frightened hatchling. A depressive, hazy miasma clawed at her mind just as it did at her ship. It seemed to say, *There is no place to go. You are alone in the world. Here, you are welcome. Here, you can live forever*; *Here, you can rule worlds!* Silri contemplated the thought of living forever as some kind of skeleton queen. She pictured her rotting clothes and crown as she floated across the

bleak and barren shores before her ruined palace. As grotesque and frightening as the imagery of such a thing was, the idea of her as "*Queen of the Galaxy,*" suddenly and irrationally made her laugh. Her absurd merriment lifted even Cuddles' spirits.

And in that moment the enchantment was broken. Mentally free and with eager anticipation, she fled from the black and unholy bowels of the Unknown Regions. "If we manage to make it back, I'm going to have a lot of thinking to do," she told Cuddles, who cooed in return, glad to be awa, and able to follow the convoluted trail back the way they'd come.

It was going to be a long trip, but she could think of no better way to pass the time than learn all she could from the holocron. Her plan: steal a bigger ship, retrieve her skeleton army, go after the Consortium, and rescue her people. Once they had their own fleet, she wouldn't need the Sith artifact and could sell it to the highest bidder.

The holographic simulacrum of Darth Dreadwar was as easily coaxed into talking as the real thing and every bit as annoying. She feigned promises to spread his message to future Sith and demanded access to any alchemical enigmas it had on record. Most were standard and unhelpful, but one caught her attention. The incantation had been one that Sorzus Syn had been working on, which Dreadwar's holo said had been acquired from "a wicked old woman on Dathomir."

"Which makes it *our* spell!" Silri said aloud. It involved the summoning of abominations from some place called the Charnel Worlds that the Dark Lady called *Witchlings*. "So," she said aloud, "monsters from Hell. Ok, what's so special about these?"

As she went on to learn, whereas Smoke Demons and Sithspawn were killers with base cunning, Witchlings were intelligent enough to serve as assassins and spies. Dreadwar's hologram noted that Syn baked aptitude into the design, though even she had struggled with controlling them, and it was uncertain if she'd had success prior to her arrest and execution. Silri contemplated the fun she'd have using them against Zann and Fen and tried not to fall asleep as Dreadwar droned on about quantum mechanics and evolutionary psychology until finally he returned to the part about their capacity for murder and infiltration. "Capable of reknitting their flesh into the shape of their targets while inheriting the memories of their victims, Witchlings seem the perfect method by which to eliminate one's rivals…"

With these creatures, none of my sisters would have to risk their lives! She didn't know how Syn had accomplished it—whether she or her predecessor seduced or ensnared some shapeshifting race to use as a vessel or if the corporeal form was new—but neither did she care. The galaxy was filled with far more mysteries than most grasped, and men like Zann were trapped in cynical, conventional mindsets, their dismissiveness revealing a shallow heart or secret fear of not having control. Having seen and experienced enough in her short life, she knew better.

The holocron noted the location of the formula would be found in Sorzus Syn's journal in her palace. All she had to do was secure it. Silri sighed as she set a course to Ziost, already doubting the wisdom of unleashing such creatures into the galaxy, since they could cause havoc beyond her intended targets. But she couldn't get past Zann's threat to her sisters. *If a blowhard like Dreadwar thought he could control them, there's no reason I can't as well.*

Silri arrived on Ziost and the citadel of Sorzus Syn. Cuddles and her own legerdemain kept at bay the dire guardians that tried to dissuade them while she went about locating the journals in Syn's castle. There, in a hidden alcove in her dressing chamber, she found passage to a secret underground lab. On a console adjacent to an array of oxidized tools and implements that she didn't recognize lay the requisite journal covered in a thick layer of dust. Inside it lay a map to the hidden "Breeding Pens of the Ninûshwodzakut" along with instructions for bringing forth the Witchlings.

Setting Cuddles loose was harder than she thought it would be. For one, he didn't want to leave her side. Nor did she really want him to, but in the event that anything went wrong, he'd be safe in the forests far from major cities or ruins where he'd easily be able to procure food and shelter. If things went as she hoped, she'd come and find him. With this promise, he loped off sadly. Sighing, she set off for the Breeding Pens to begin the hard work of summoning her Witchlings.

It may be that Syn hadn't perfected the incantation or Silri lacked enough experience, but the brood that emerged from the pit proved obdurate, violent, and unstable, unresponsive to even her lightwhip. She realized then that whoever shared the spell with Sorzus Syn did so in order to destroy her as a rival. In her final moments, when she realized that she'd lost control of the situation and their horrifying visages looked down on her like melted skullforms of Hendanyn Death Masks, claws raking open her abdomen, she thought, *This was a bad idea!*

Sensing her death from Dathomir, Tamith Kai and Lomi Plo—two Nightsisters of the Great Canyon Coven—broke free of their gaol and came to Tyber Zann searching for answers and prepared to exact vengeance. But Zann was already dead, having been shredded to pieces by some unknown adversary, and Urai Fen—who blamed Silri—was frantically trying to keep the Consortium together. Revealing to him that they feared their mistress also dead, the Nightsisters demanded all that he knew of what had earlier transpired. As he didn't have the energy or skill to take on two Nightsisters, he told them of her theft of the ship and Darth Dreadwar's holocron.

Surmising that the logical place she would go was the Sith Worlds, Kai and Plo flew off to the Esstran sector. The Dark Side was strong there, but the Nightsisters had their own formulae for tracing their people, and they came to Ziost. Silri's Rancor waited outside of Syn's palace, snorting to them as they disembarked.

"Welcome, Sisters," Silri addressed as she floated up before them, her eyes aglow. Plo and Kai began casting defensive spells. "I assure you, it is me… Stretch out, and you will know… Yes, I live on in this form, and it is good to see you again."

"How is this possible?" Kai demanded, beginning to weep for her fallen friend.

"Still your tears, my beloved sisters. Before I embarked upon my failed experiment with the creatures that killed me and took my ship to kill Zann, I learned things from the Sith that enabled me to enact an old Nightsister spell thought lost since the time of Mother Talzin. And so, my spirit lives on, attached to my loyal beast. Keep him near until he dies and I will guide you to your rightful destiny as Queens of the Galaxy!"

Tamith Kai and Lomi Plo looked at each other sadly, then, as if coming to a decision, they nodded. "Let it be as you say, sister. Teach us the ways of the Sith."

THE LOREMASTER OF THE SHADOW SANCTUARY

Darth Dreadwar scanned the Black Temple. From the Dark Side itself, he could learn nothing, suffused as it was in a cere-cloth of pitch. Across the desolate plateaus and plains undulated absurd and fantastical things he'd never before seen. Dreadwar assumed such to be the results of advanced spellcraft and entered the sanctuary, discerning immense power within. He had no belief in destiny, but perhaps he'd been awoken at this time to influence the Sith to ascend once more and reclaim their heritage. This time, he would not make the same mistake he'd made with Naga Sadow and would go right to the top, destroying any who stood in his path.

The Black Temple was the size of a small city, and Dreadwar drifted as a specter through its labyrinthine corridors, vertiginous stairs, incongruous architectural phantasmagoria, and hundreds of hidden passageways, several of which opened to voids and a few that transported one to impossible spaces in other parts of the gigantic manse. Innumerable shades haunted these corrosive halls, with more joining their numbers each year, as there were always some who came to their fescennine banquets who never left alive. Dreadwar cared little for their sadistic games as he made his way into the Temple's ancient heart where one of the mysterious leaders dwelt… the ruthless and horrible Lord Toxmalb.

From his silver throne, he floated over—a taut and creaking skeletal frame barely concealed in a costly vermillion robe. Strings of flesh stretched over the rictus maw of his laughing mouth, with his head crowned in the two-pronged, heliotropic hat of the archabbot. Lord Toxmalb had been a philosopher of a kind, though from what world there were none left to tell; nor were there any to ask what kind of man he once had been before he came to haunt the ruined temple, whether his eyes had always fell

upon the whispering Shadows, or if the thoughts that moved through his mind were ever in opposition to them. Dreadwar supposed he'd been a member of the Kissai.

Orbs ablaze and narrowed within his head's deep hollows, Lord Toxmalb crept closer. Buzzing like the crepitation of the locust, he spoke to the newcomer in the ghastly tongue of the ancient Sith, a poisonous, painful language presaged to be the only speech left at the end of all time: "Do you speak the old tongue?"

"Of course," Dreadwar hissed back. "Though I prefer the Old Galactic Standard."

"Very well," the Lich King said. "It has taken you a long time to waken! Not very omnipotent for a *god*, if that's what you think you are, Darth Dreadwar!"

"I have lived thousands of years," the cowled form that had been Ku'ar Danar answered. "There *are no gods*," he rasped. "*I* am as close as you will get!" Several heavy busts were placed around the room of previous Loremasters. Dreadwar then telekinetically lifted and hurled the one of Darth Fractalus at Lord Toxmalb's head.

The Rhandite only laughed as the statue deflected off an invisible shield before him and settled back down in its former position. "Not very impressive, I must say." All of the busts then floated up into the air, opened their mouths, and breathed fire at him. Dreadwar instinctively pulled back from the heat. "I am the Head Lorekeeper of Rhand, known as the Blessed Lord Toxmalb. I am much like you, only *enlightened*, having shed all false ideologies steeped in arrogance, self-aggrandizement, and the *petulant child's* notion of the universe."

"The gods are inventions for the lesser races to fear," Dreadwar returned, summoning up a vision of smiling beings looking down from the clouds, "to provide us with a basis by which to establish law and order, and to maintain the power of kings."

"You think it was *science* that made you into what you are? For a shadow, you are rather ignorant." The vision Dreadwar had conjured altered as Lord Toxmalb showed him a series of cataclysmic events. "Had you known Darth Nemesis…" His image then appeared, followed by others. "Primordius, Dread Lord of the Dark Traverse, Trayus, Soros—even Venomis, spiteful though he was—*those* were gods!!" Their faces flashed before them, all turning to skeletal wraiths. "To set events into motion, you were led by one of the Powers—whom you deny and foolishly believe to be Chance and Coincidence! You were granted access to rare lore, given gifts of power and wealth, all to lead you to the Dark. *What a waste!* You may yet have *some* use, I'll grant, but so do all in our Shadow Worlds. Yet, compared to the Wizards of Wor, you are but an ethereal filament scattered to the wind! And they all knew something you do not! True power comes from the Ancient Ones!" The vision ended with the dissolution of the Lich Kings, their bones turning to dust. "It is their will that we obey!"

"It is *my* will that I am concerned with!" He could no longer hide his disgust. "You continue to speak of these Outer Gods as if they are anything but legends! Is this why you hide in these desolate worlds? Why you are not ruling the galaxy as you should! You await the command of *fairy beings*. They are *not* coming, for they do *not* exist!"

The room suddenly disappeared, replaced by a void absent of stars—only the endless black. "You are an *old* fool, Professor Coqui Tanar! The Dark has brought you here for a purpose… but perhaps that purpose was to provide me with amusement!"

Dreadwar began to freeze. He watched as molecular parts of him began to flake off and float away. "Stop this! *What is it you want?*" he demanded, feeling a terror he hadn't experienced in a long time—that of existential dread!

Lord Toxmalb now stood as a giant before him. The pieces of Danar that were breaking away from him were absorbed by him as he grew impossibly massive. "Always you have imagined yourself superior to others. What you think is your will is the delusion of your ego. Let us end this delusion once and for all." Now reverting to the old Sith tongue, he hissed, "I will give you a brief tour of the torment that awaits you if you fail in your education…" With that, Dreadwar experienced what felt like ages of extreme horror in the Charnel Worlds.

Then, as if it had never been, the nightmare stopped and they were back in Lord Toxmalb's study. So relieved was he by the cessation of whatever gramaries Toxmalb had assailed him with, and impressed despite himself, Dreadwar could only catch his breath, wondering how any illusion could feel so real.

Toxmalb asked, "Why are *you* not ruling the galaxy?"

"… The Sith were onerous and driven by ambition and racial pride. They failed to unite under my authority. I had hoped that our kind would've known better."

"Lord Shadowspawn watched as the Stygian Sith rushed into doom time and again. The True Sith Empire sometimes used their failures to our advantage or even manipulated them. *We* survived the aeons because we require no Emperor and so forestalled the relentless internecine struggles of our brethren. Heralding only the Immortal Gods, as the Sith'ari and we as mere vassals, we expanded beyond the Nihil Retreat, subduing all in our path. *Their* voices—whispered to the Priests and Lorekeepers from deepest abysses—guide us. We seek neither glory nor vanity… nor *order*, only the sanctified entropy of the Dark. Few truly comprehend it, but it is the *only* true path!"

"Perhaps they comprehend it all too well," Dreadwar rebutted, finding again his voice but using it more carefully than before, "and reject it. It is *ultimate* annihilation that you are speaking of—the oblivion of all, utter nothingness."

"Do not think I cannot perceive your thoughts, *Darth Dreadwar!*" he spoke Danar's title with a sneer. "You think only a madman would follow this path; and at this very moment, you suspect that I am its king! You think us enslaved to the Dark—and so the weaker are—but *we* are in league with it!"

"It is not in my nature to bow and scrape, so I will not pretend to do so now. Nevertheless, you have me at a disadvantage. You say the Dark Side has brought me here for a purpose. If so, then show me how the Way of the Dark is the *true* path."

"The Celestials revere sentient life, but what have all sentients inevitably brought but war and death to the galaxy? Our Stygian brethren believe that by virtue of power they have the right to rule, but even at their height, they too only brought destruction. So tell me, Darth Dreadwar, what truly reigns as king above all?"

"Death."

"*Yes!* Death is the ultimate truth that not even the greatest Sith will allow himself to admit! Death reigns as king over all! But who has conquered Death?"

"We have."

"*We have!*" Lord Toxmalb sibilated. "This power comes not from comprehending abstruse formulae related to the elder sciences of the universe nor from hoary hexes

in the holocrons of long-dead Sith. The Way of the Dark is a gift, channeled from those planes that serve as the Nexus of the Dark to those rare few who are the greatest amongst the great, who are willing to submit to the ultimate truth of the universe! A few ancient spirits, some even *older* than you, have proven themselves worthy. Most are but pale reflections of what they once were, insane and chained to physical objects, tombs, and holocrons, and filled with little more than empty hubris!"

"Reality is not for the faint of heart…" Dreadwar acknowledged.

"Tell me, what prevented your apotheosis on Nilrebmah?"

"A portal opened; some… *things* came through… They were as shades…"

"Ah, yes!" Toxmalb nodded. "*The Shadows*. That is in essence what we now are."

"Dark spirits we may be, but even in this form, I remain a man of science. Certainly, you of all people know that the energy-beings of this galaxy are but advanced races that evolved to forsake the need for physical bodies."

"There *were* a few who attained this nonpareil state, but even they could not long escape the Hunters from Beyond… and you are in error if you think that they who haunt the Dark are merely an *advanced* race." Sensing Dreadwar's resistance, the Lorekeeper hissed, "For one as old and powerful as you, you remain an embittered Alsakani professor." Dreadwar was then mentally transported to his past. He saw himself as he had been: a teacher who only barely hid his disdain for his students and colleagues. As he saw himself, he thought, *No wonder that most hated me. I'd never known just how transparent my negative feelings for them were.* "You murdered your own associates, the few who believed themselves your friends, and never even grasped your own motive: *jealousy*. Their destruction was little more than your attempt to prove you were smarter than them." Dreadwar watched as his younger self recited the incantation that obliterated them. He recalled being shocked by the results, but now realized that he'd never mourned them. Most of what he'd felt was elation. Seeing it now, he knew that he'd be diagnosed as a psychopath.

"My past is my past," he spat. "I came only to stir the Sith to rise up and take their place as masters of the galaxy. But if it is death that you seek, I can give you that!" He transported himself back into the present, materialized a black blade, and sliced Lord Toxmalb clean through. His robe and mitre dropped to the ground…

…and rose up again, reconstituting into his former hideous form. Toxmalb squeezed Danar's skeletal hand, making the blade burn itself to ash.

This time, all turned to a dark crimson, as black suns with starry eyes surrounded Dreadwar and spoke: "It *is* the darkness of death that we seek, not for ourselves, but for the false worlds and those who would preserve it. And it is power we seize, not for ruling over a galaxy dedicated to destruction, but for the Work of the Dark."

"Why would gods want to rule over dust?"

The room returned to normal. "Azrayl once misunderstood as you do," Toxmalb stated. "The End Lords tried to bridge the gap between the True Sith and Stygian Sith. Led by the Synod of Six, they burrowed a passage into Tartis where they were met by the Shadow Spirits. Recognizing these as their true Masters, the Azrayl opened themselves up and were *entered!* Through arcane means, they passed knowledge to their fellow End Lords who continued to work in tandem with Bataal Bandu who in turn fed the Shadow Council. Service to the ego, as our Stygian brethren do, versus

service to the Dark, as the True Sith do. The Azrayl have since learned that there is no time for lost causes. The Stygian Sith serve our purposes in other ways, and the Immortal Gods are not as the Supreme Maker. They will not forgive, and they will not tolerate unbelievers."

"What then do you see as your purpose in this age?" Dreadwar asked.

"It is as it has always been: to open the Door to the Dark and let it flood all!"

"How is this to be accomplished?"

"There are six remaining seals that have yet proven impervious to breaking, and cleverly were they designed, preventing those in the Forbidden Regions from escaping—save through its shallowest pools during rare conjunctions of the stars—while allowing interlopers to enter should they be so foolish. You're companion of earlier was one of the lucky few… So vast is our realm that a *thousand* protectorates can exist before they are discovered, but in time we find them… Additionally, the hyperlanes are tangled like the entrails of a Blood Eater, and so the prophecy has said they shall remain until all Seven Seals are broken—or the last of the Celestials has been destroyed, banished, or imprisoned!"

Dreadwar thought upon it. "*If* all that you say is true, and *if* you can find all the seals, and *if* your Celestials can be vanquished… This task does not seem likely."

"*Not* for mortals! It has taken millennia and the alteration of many stars, but we have at last identified them, for the Elder Signs do not take the forms they did in ages past. They are the Mortis Monolith, Centerpoint Station, the Cosmic Turbine at Vultar, the Quintarad, the Ianane Ring, the Ciratu Spheres, and the Aur Diamonds, each of which must be unlocked or destroyed to open the next. The first of these was numinously attached to three incarnate Celestials hiding in an interior realm of Mortis. Astute as they thought they were, they had imprudently taken on physical form, allowing them to be diminished by various events, culminating in a ritual enacted by our lesser brethren, Lords Plagueis and Sidious. Upon their deaths, we shattered the Mortis seal but also learned a valuable truth: we do not need to unlock or break the seals—galactic war will do that just as well!"

"The galaxy is not prone to conflict on such a scale," Dreadwar returned. "Otherwise, they'd have been broken already."

The Loremaster scoffed. "Had you not sought your own power; had you listened to us; had you sought the Forbidden Books, you would have proven useful! When the Immortal Gods sit on the Nine Thrones of the Nine Earthworlds, *then* shall we have galactic war such as the universe has never seen, and the Seven Seals will break!"

The obsession these sorcerers have with their religion and prophecies is revolting, he thought quietly, careful to keep it buried. "Yet, here you remain trapped."

Lord Toxmalb laughed—if such a hideous din could be called that. "The Shadow Worlds are not our *prison*… they are our domain from which we rule."

"There is something you're not telling me…" Dreadwar closed his eyes and pushed out all other thoughts and sensations. "Ah! You're not just waiting for the old gods to awaken… you've been… *infiltrating!*"

"It has taken a long time, but it is nearly done. Many of the Earthworlds have fallen. The Cold One roams in secret, orchestrating galactic goverments by means of his pets; the End Lords gather knowledge and power; and the Shadow Council maneuvers

the Stygian Sith and fallen Jedi who've taken up their mantle. You played some part in these matters, but it is ultimately *they* who manipulated the Greater and Lesser Schisms, the corruption of intergalactic politics, and reformation of the Dark Worlds under Atha Prime. They taught the lost secrets of the Star Forges through Raspir; they made vassals of the Dread Host of Oricon, the oligarchy of Thule, and the purebloods of Tund near Oseon where the Ancient Ones gave a taste of what was to come. Few know of us; fewer still know of those who call to us from the depths… of the Rotting Sickness who spreads silently through the cracks of the Cosmos, of the burning black stars who herald the Eldritch Powers. Soon, our united forces will encircle a galaxy whose leaders are secretly aligned with us! Soon, the Nine will take their thrones, and the Great Chaos Serpents shall go forth in fire and blood! Soon, we shall ride forth to dominion and destruction, and the Kingdom of Shadow will reign for all time!"

Dreadwar remained silent and stoic, hiding his thought of him as a fanatic.

"If my words do not convince you…" Lord Toxmalb grinned hungrily, his putrescent tongue licking his top teeth where once there had been lips.

Before he did anything rash, Dreadwar replied, "It is just that I have heard such things before—have even preached them to my own people… before they perished."

The Lorekeeper drew uncomfortably close. "There is much about the nature of reality that you do not know; if I allow your continued existence, you must. Then, when the stars are right, you will hear them call to you, and *you will be humbled!*"

There was a pregnant pause before Danar answered him. "You shall forgive me if I wait to see the evidence before I accept…"

At that, Lord Toxmalb's form turned to black shadow and his narrowed eyes brightened into fiery stars. "You have been asleep a long time, Ku'ar Danar. If you wish to be of use to the Immortal Gods when they emerge, I will find a suitable task for you."

"Very well," rasped Dreadwar, undaunted. "I hope it does not take too long."

Amused by his bravado, Lord Toxmalb released Dreadwar into the Temple of Darkness. The weird wizards and malevolent entities that dwelt there tolerated his spectral presence, one of many. Envious and deeply cruel, many disregarded, mocked, or attempted to sabotage him, but such were the ways of black spirits of pure hatred; Dreadwar endured it as he stalked the maddening halls, learning what he could of the haunted world he now inhabited and occasionally challenging the various sorcerers for position and authority. In this time, he also perused some of the primordial and modern texts, of which Lord Cronal's was particularly intriguing.

EYES WIDE SHUT

Ere the passage of too many leprous moons, Lord Toxmalb finally found a suitable use for Dreadwar and sent him to an ally from long ago. Anxious to rule again, he permitted his spirit to be placed into a spent holocron containing instructions for his release or transfer into a more suitable object of his choosing. This was sent as a gift to the Darama of the Yevetha on N'zoth.

The brightness of the Koornacht Cluster masked the stars of the larger galaxy, and for so long did the Yevetha lie in wait that later generations refused to believe there

were stars other than their own. But they'd lost none of their cunning in that time, and as they had forgotten the galaxy, so had the galaxy forgotten them.

Until the Empire came. Upon receiving a gift from the Far Off Ones, as they called the True Sith, the Yevetha's ancient Darama (a word that meant "Chosen One") had been told to wait for the signal, and this command was passed down from one ruler to the next. The Yevetha knew now that the time of their release was near, and to a person they dissembled while working in the newly built shipyards. The Imperials were astonished at how quickly they took to technology, failing to see the red flags until it was too late and they were being slaughtered—over fifteen thousand of them.

Fifteen years later, the signal came, and the Yevetha were ready, taking the ships they'd constructed into the larger galaxy. Darth Dreadwar believed he would lead them to their dominion and the start of his galactic reign. But Viceroy Nil Spaar had other plans. He initially deferred to Dreadwar in most things, including the promise to procure him a host body, but this was merely an extension of his dissimulation.

Viceroy Spaar had earlier killed Officer Jian Paret, the Imperial in charge of the garrison at N'zoth, and removed the hateful Human's eye which he then threaded with Nihil Smokestone, preserving what to outward appearances was but a trophy that he carried with him wherever he went. Dreadwar was as oblivious as Paret and failed to note how his counsel had grown tiresome to the Darama, who concluded that the evil spirit had served his purpose. So while the Dark Lord anticipated his resurrection in a new body that Spaar had hinted of, the Viceroy instead sent his disembodied consciousness into the meltmassif-infused orb where, at last, Dreadwar was silenced.

And in the darkness of the Nine Hells, in which his black spirit sojourns, he is torn apart by the very horrors he denies. Such is the legacy of Darth Dreadwar.

So are all the Sith and their followers doomed, trapped by their own malice and blindness, unwilling to comprehend that their actions derive from weakness and not strength, from theft, mendacity, and corruption. This does not mean their threat should be dismissed. Though many allies of the old Enemy are no more, in the vast and deep Unknown Regions, many yet reign undiscovered as their great and terrible empires swell within the Shadow, gathering ever more followers by the murmuring and unholy sepulchers of evil, ancient gods who nightly gain vitality.

More dreadful still are those wandering stars who have not yet revealed themselves, who have not yet stepped out of the gloom of their abyssal vaults, who watch and wait for the Infernal Suns and Crimson Moons to align and command the corybantic armies—Achernar and Erlik and his sinister queens amongst them deep in the Kingdom of Shadow —for the Sign of Yrimid, known as Yamil Zacra, eldest Emperor of the burning, baleful Black Stars, will come forth with fiery, outspread tendrils knowing that the time of ancient portent is at hand to bring about the galaxy's end….

And so the Jedi must be wise and the governments vigilant, putting aside greed and pride to act in concert against the True Sith. It is not beyond hope, for the Sith prophecies fail to tell the whole truth. When the Balyeg and the Leviathan lock horns and the Ancient Ones break free to lead their followers to the swallowing of stars, they will meet their end, for then the Swoophawk will soar, and the Light Eternal will shine upon Skyriver greater than ever before, and the Prophecy of Restoration and the Chosen One will be brought to its final fulfilment.

CHAPTER EIGHTY-FOUR

THE VERDICT

THE TESTIMONY OF LEIA ORGANA SOLO

"I believe we've come to the point where we may stop," Reina Solov announced to the audience. "It does no favor to Hextrophon to read any further into the extravagant last section, labeled the 'epilogue,' which I understand Q9 purports to have been composed *after* his death. It won't come as a surprise to any of you when I say that I remain skeptical of the veracity of what is, essentially, a creation-myth. I *am* convinced he had some insight into the past and other areas of intrigue that are well worth investigation, but as to much of it… I suspect they were fueled by delusions and waking dreams, the evidence for which I think is obvious. While I'll abide by the Council's decision, I'm not sure what those of you who support publication hope to accomplish, save to destroy a man's reputation and cast aspersions on his important prior work. And yes, I am thinking of the Council as well as what Hextrophon would have really wanted."

Q9 made a rude noise but otherwise remained silent.

"I have to admit," started Heilan Rotham, senior professor of Lorrd University, "that despite my own skepticism—and irrespective of whatever truth exists in Hextrophon's document—I feel for the man. It is neither a happy nor healthy fate to have trod such desolate paths."

"We *could* edit out the more fantastical portions," allowed Janzikek. "If we could trim certain elements, I would agree to release it with the Council's authorization and even write a foreword indicating that he was expanding on the work of Dr. Bowen…"

"In other words, you'd castrate it *and* cut out its heart!" sneered Baobab.

"Some of the material related to certain races, such as the Yuuzhan Vong, is new to us," one of the younger Obroan scholars expressed. "It would require further study before confirmation, but it appears sound enough. I say it's a good compromise."

"*It is no such thing!*" Dee Savyest retorted loudly. "And *how* exactly would we do that, I might ask? The very core of Hextrophon's fable eschews everything that has been cosmologically and biologically accepted as to the origin of species in this universe, not to mention the dates we've come to rely upon, which, by implication, he tosses aside like so much chaff. Or does this body now think that black holes were caused by the escape of ancient monsters from Otherspace? Frankly, Janzikek, I'm surprised at your sudden magnanimity! And no, Hoole, I'm not trying to protect *dogma* but years of evidence and equations that have stood up to rigorous scrutiny. On these grounds alone, I can't see why we don't do all of us a favor and delete this nonsense altogether."

There were several angry grunts, dismissive noises, and a few assents, and even Solov rolled her eyes at this bit of hyperbole. Historians were not wont to speak in terms of deleting books no matter how controversial. "Let's be clear," Godalhi interrupted before another heated row erupted, "that there will be no destroying anything in this society, neither Hextrophon's manuscript nor anyone else's! That's why we have the SD Files."

"In my long years as both a Jedi and a scientist," Tionne Solusar said, "I have come to see that when we limit ourselves to what is currently thought to be true, we throw away the possibility of discovery and change. What I think many of you are overlooking is the fact that Hextrophon's manuscript presents deeper truths than merely the historical, which is but an underpinning to explorations of ethics, morality, and community."

"I agree with the Jedi Master on this," Jedi Historian Veste Gesdol concurred. "And I've never understood this obdurate defense of the prevailing understanding. Nearly all of our facts are based on observations and interpretations, be it by organics or droids—it's the best system we have, but hardly perfect or always right."

"So you're suggesting we waste what precious little time we have analyzing and debunking every delusional crackpot with a half-baked idea!" Savyest complained.

"Hextrophon is *no* crackpot!" Gesdol protested. "And while certainly unconventional, nothing in it sounds like the work of someone who is delusional. I find a cogent hypothesis with complex and internally consistent elements that bear the ring of truth."

"For my part, I have always supported its publication," Graf-Well added dramatically, "and yet my findings that Hextrophon could not have composed most of the manuscript have not even warranted the respect they deserve!"

"We appreciate them, Graf-Well," Na'al assuaged, "and I'm sure we all look forward to reading your interpretations when your book is released, but as we're nearing the end of the third day, we must move on. I suggest we put the matter to vote."

"I realize I'm not a member of the Council," Leia Solo gently interrupted, "but may I say a few words beforehand?" Savyest sighed loudly, but she was acknowledged. "Yes, there are mythic, even fantastic elements in Hextrophon's treatise. They form the foundation of his work and can't simply be edited out. Like it or not, Hextrophon's Pre-Republic history contains aspects that some will find difficult to accept. Even I had difficulty accepting some of it!"

The room stirred. Dr. Nuar and Baobab reacted as if they'd been struck; even Janzikek seemed taken aback. Only Hoole maintained a slight smile.

"But who of us would have believed a day before the events at Belkadan that Ithor, Kalarba, and Sernpidal would be no more? That Coruscant would be transformed into an overgrown jungle? The Yuuzhan Vong showed us that monsters exist, but we should have known that already. Palpatine and far too many others should have convinced us of that, at least. Yet if the forces of darkness are real, then, perhaps those of the light are as well. Hextrophon's recordings of ancient history have been substantiated by several sources, including the Watcher, and Mistress Mnemos has sent in a report stating that she confirms his conclusions, as does Cuenyne…"

"Three *obviously* damaged cognitive modules," Janzikek retorted.

"There are some who say that history is written by the victors," Leia continued, "yet I've seen that that is not always the case. This Council, in whatever form it's taken over the years, has ensured that even with the threat of persecution, all sides of the story are presented. You are not relics or fossils. When you publish a variety of ideas, theories, and concepts, you prove you are a needed organism that preserves different avenues of possible truth in the face of those who would wipe out all but their own.

"Arhul Hextrophon was a vital part of that organism, a man of integrity and a staunch defender of truth. If this work is the product of some psychological difficulty he was having prior to his death, well, so be it. Hextrophon has earned the right to have it stand or fall on its own merits. *Of course*, some will scoff. That will always be the case, or do you think that everything that bears the Council's stamp has been readily accepted by every reader?" The audience laughed lightly. "If you still fear such derision will reflect poorly on you or on this august body, send your critics to me. I have already prepared a statement for our resident journalist stating that I have personally borne witness to several of the outlandish-seeming things Hextrophon wrote of. I would likely be dead if not for my encounter with the entity known as Wutzek who imparted to our dear, departed friend Chewbacca a glimpse into the Earliest Days before he was called away to the task of bringing forth new offspring. And yes, I *died* as a result of my encounter with Tilotny and those that you call the Bedlam Spirits—who I saw with my own eyes and heard with my own ears! *Impossible*, you say? Perhaps, but nevertheless true. So if anyone wishes to mock or scorn the Council, they can first speak to me!" Leia had to wait for the room to quiet down again before going on. "But there are many who will not be so quick to dismiss the *seemingly* impossible."

"Your exploits," Gulek rebutted, "and the oddities you encountered only corroborate names and the existence of unknown entities, such as the Bedlam Spirits. These experiences are anecdotal and subjective and don't furnish proof, as you are no doubt aware. You believe you died and were brought back by this Splendid Ap, and I believe that you believe it, but that doesn't make it so. Hextrophon, in his state-of-mind, could have appropriated your encounters to fashion his creation myth."

"Stars and Galaxies, Gulek!" exclaimed Hoole. "You speak as if anything that hasn't gone under your tiny microscope is invalid!"

"I've heard many theories over the years to explain—or explain away—what I know happened," Leia responded. "Hextrophon's is the only one that makes *any* sense to me. As far as proof, I could no more prove I'd seen Tilotny than that I can prove I'd dropped a water balloon on Tarkin's head or been his wife's handmaiden for a day, yet all of those things happened. The creature that came out of Hanapen's body doesn't furnish proof, but it *does* provide a striking piece of evidence that we would do well to consider…"

"As does the corroboration of numerous others, my testimony, and the information given me by the Watcher," reminded Q9.

A thin man of nondescript age suddenly stood up. "May I say a few words?"

"And who exactly are you?!" Gulek demanded.

"I… I was invited here by…"

"Yes, yes, never mind all that," interrupted Janzikek. "State your name and business, or we'll be here all night!"

"As you wish. My name is Jakob Korrin." He looked around to see if anyone recalled the name. Several had heard it before but couldn't place it.

"You're the son of Don-Wan Kihotay," announced Tem Eliss, "or, rather, Hess Korrin. Your father headed the antiquities wing on Obroa-skai before it was destroyed by the ISB." The Iyra didn't say it, but everyone knew that act had caused the good professor to snap and become "Don-Wan Kihotay."

"It wasn't just the destruction of the antiquities section but of the original copies of Master Bo-Jaccan of Órgonon's manuscripts that made my father *digress*. You see, the Korrins are descendents of the prominent Órgonon clan."

That caused an audible gasp. Bo-Jaccan was well-known as one of the Lost Twenty, Jedi Masters who'd turned their back on the Jedi Order. Bo-Jaccan's own father, Jun-Pula, had been excommunicated from the Order, which some argued may have led to his son becoming a Renunciate. First knighted as a Consular for his contributions to Ximology before graduating to Historian and Researcher, Master Bo-Jaccan was considered a heretic for his views of the Force, counter-histories of the Ruusan Reformation, and historiographical critiques of several famed Jedi chroniclers, including Master Dorak and Master Gnost-Dural. Bo-Jaccan abdicated within a day of his induction as Master to become an Intergalacticist revolutionary, which started an intellectual movement of Force-*insensitives* lobbying to radically reorganize galactic affairs under a rationally planned system. His efforts were, unfortunately for him, hampered by the violent actions of unwanted apostate Jedi Padawans and Knights who flocked to the Renunciate's side.

"His *Citadel Journals* was fascinating," interjected Gesdol, "written while incarcerated in a prison for rogue Jedi! I don't agree with every conclusion he made, but he had a soft spot for the plight of oppressed non-Human species in the galaxy. Had he lived in the present day and not over six centuries ago, many of his views would've been tolerated if not outright accepted. In *The Mismeasure of Life*, he called the Jedi practice of sundering children from parents a 'great evil intended to smother the potential for structural, revolutionary change in the galaxy.'"

"I agree," acknowledged Master Tionne. "Had his ideas not been rejected at every turn, he might not have fallen into an extremist ideology. He saw the Order as a platitudinal, philanthropic anodyne but rejected the so-called Dark Jedi reaction as facile and overwrought. His inability to effect meaningful change made him see himself as a fool. I don't know about the rest of you, but I find him a tragic figure."

"Gentlebeings, we can schedule another meeting to discuss the Lost Twenty if you'd like," Gulek interrupted, "but I'm tired, and I don't see what this has to do with anything."

"My apologies, Chief Historian," Korrin offered, "and I do appreciate the interest and open-mindedness the Jedi here have shown towards my ancestor—he was, after all, my father's lifework."

"Shame his later writings were destroyed before they could see the light of day," Gesdol expressed. "I'd have liked to have read them."

"You might have that chance," Korrin replied. "Some of it survived…" The room became very silent. Nothing got the attention of historians more than the recovery of old documents once believed lost. "As you know, Bo-Jaccan led a self-imposed exile on the barren Outer Rim moon of Ggof'ahm. With its partial mundicide, everyone assumed his later works were lost, but his followers had made copies. Anyway, before my father's… *illness*, he uncovered a cache of these. But before he could even read any, the ISB seized them, and so we thought them forever lost. It wouldn't be until years after his passing that I learned the truth. The ISB was charged with destroying Jedi antiquities, and many were… but the black market for such items was so lucrative that there were no few agents who sold them to private firms and individuals, and there are still a lot in the hands of wealthy collectors. I guess I got lucky. When one of the collectors passed away, his heirs tracked me down. I've since made digital and flimsiplast copies for myself and brought the originals back to the library."

Janzikek modded. "This *is* fascinating, and I would very much like a copy, but let us cut to the quick. What do these recovered manuscripts have to do with Hextrophon?"

"Bo-Jaccan encountered the Bedlam Spirits!" Korrin explained. "It revolutionized his way of thinking and is partly why his readers said he'd been driven mad. He writes of Illathurion and his debate with the Architect named Splendid Ap. This is a *six hundred and fifty-year old manuscript* utilizing names and ideas that few if any at that time had ever heard. Hextrophon couldn't have known about it. No one did." For a change, the Council members quietly processed this information. Then, he went on, "The parallels between the two men are interesting. Both were idealists disenchanted with an organization they felt had lost its way and both were independent thinkers who went in search of greater truths. At least, that is how I see my ancestor's work. Irrespective as to whether you deem certain parts fanciful, it seems clear that there is merit in what they found."

Voren Na'al knew it was time to conclude matters. "While we ponder the implications of this, I'd like to add one final word. I haven't said much, and it is not my intent to unduly sway you. But even if you see this treatise as more myth than fact, do we not still cherish our myths for giving us tales of courage and hope? In such dark times as these, are they not needed more than ever? And if this manuscript proves to be a record of *truth*, then it behooves us to examine it with grave consideration. Arhul's final wish was to see his document published. To that end, he went through a great deal of trial and tribulation to do so. I ask that you consider that and let the public decide for themselves."

The Council members agreed to a short break before reconvening in an adjoining alcove to vote in private. Personal droids and flesh-and-blood retainers went about supplying refreshments for the Council and its various guests. Within one hour, the Council returned to the main Conference Room with the verdict, their faces expressionless and still as the monuments of Kooroo.

A DROID AND HIS MASTER

Without preamble, Voren Na'al read the verdict: "Thirty-nine in favor, forty-two opposed. Hextrophon's journal will *not* be published by the Council. It can, of course, be published privately—" The rest of his words were drowned out by a loud, motley uproar.

Na'al furrowed his brows, surprised at his own feeling of disappointment, and took his seat, looking as grave as the face of the Scholar from the statue that stood outside the Council Hall. His colleagues had let his mentor and friend down. He knew it was the pragmatic decision, but he couldn't help but feel they'd done a disservice to everyone. Perhaps he had too. He'd voted for publication, but he wondered now if he should have spoken more vigorously in favor of it. If he was honest with himself, it wasn't just that he was uncertain if the things Hextrophon wrote were possible, but rather that he didn't *want* them to be.

Hextrophon's journal would be privately published, dismissed as the fringe work of an unstable man, read by few, and soon forgotten. Somehow, he thought things would've turned out different. The room had grown louder still as the arguments mounted.

Q9 grew tired of it and let out another long shrill note, piercing through the cacophony.

"Really, Cuenyne, you'll never win any friends tormenting them like that," Q9 seemed to say in Arhul Hextrophon's voice.

"That's the *least* of my concerns," Q9 rejoined in his own voice. "I don't know how you put up with them for so many years!"

"*Q9!*" Eliss roared, four tentacles flaring. "That is *hardly* appropriate at this time!"

"Best to let it go," Janzikek stated, almost gently.

"It's entirely appropriate," Hextrophon's voice said through Q9, "because I'm not *technically* dead; though, perhaps I am *different*."

An awkward hush fell upon the room. Had the droid's mechanical brain *actually* snapped? Was that the real reason he killed Hanapen? Droids *could* suffer the effects of extreme stress. Before anyone could take measures to remove him from the room, Q9's "Hextrophon" voice spoke again: "I have to say, I was curious to see how you'd all vote."

"I won't say, 'I told you so,' but I *did tell you so!*" Q9 retorted sarcastically in his own voice. "We could have skipped all of the drama and debates."

"I suppose, but it was nice to hear my friends defend me—sort of like being at my own funeral," Hextrophon's voice said. "And besides, debate is healthy."

"That's why I let you ramble," Q9 said just before the room turned black as night.

A rubicund, pyramidal blur too fast to focus on crossed the room. And then the stars came out… "You'll notice," Hextrophon said, now a disembodied voice that seemed to hover above everyone's heads, "that the constellations here are quite different than anything you've seen. That's because you've been brought to a different cosmic plane."

It was as if the chamber had become invisible—no walls, floors, ceiling, or podium—only the bright luminaries and the people in the chamber fearfully clinging to their seats or to each other. Stark terror marked the faces of most, save for Hoole, who could be heard chuckling to himself, and Savyest, who croaked about Q9's "nasty tricks."

"Is this some kind of game?" warned Eliss. With nearly all of his tentacles now waving in a threatening manner, he looked like one of the sinister entities of Otherspace.

"It must be," protested Rotham. "The magician, Xaverri, was known to have pulled off stunts like this." Her statement was repeated throughout the audience, many of whom stood up in defiance of the "parlor tricks" being played on them.

The room had become notably colder by this time, though not dangerously so. The constellations of galactic clusters whizzed by at terrific speeds. It was exhilarating, beautiful, and utterly terrifying. Those who believed it to be a trick gathered their indignant courage and demanded in loud voices to know what was going on and to make it stop. Solov, determined to expose the chicanery and put an end to this farce, ordered her personal assistant-droid to uncover the ruse.

Her LE manifest droid cleared her throat loud enough to silence everyone: "To my knowledge, Q9 is not engaged in any chicanery. In fact, he does not appear to be amongst us at the moment; nor can I determine a cause to account for this phenomenon. My sensors tell me that we have departed Coruscant to unknown, outer spheres." Tionne and several other droids in the room vocalized similar conclusions. "I cannot logically explain how this is possible," the droid continued. "My former master would say we are all suffering from mass hallucination, though that that would be an absurd supposition."

Loud bursts of chatter followed LE's revelation which grew to shouts and cries as a glowing, anti-parallel helix rushed towards them. The helix undulated like twin Bouncers within the plexus of a pulsing firmament, but that was lost on the body as the horror and precipitancy of their course dawned on them. Finally, their velocity slowed, and as they passed by, one of the two helix-heads spoke.

"Apologies for having to go to such extreme measures to persuade you," the rolling Bouncer-helix said in Hextrophon's voice, "but it does make for a rather fine adventure, though some of you will undoubtedly convince yourselves it was all a bad dream." The Council and its guests were mostly silent and terrified, convinced they indeed had fallen into some phantasmic realm of nightmare. Na'al and Hoole were the primary ones attempting to maintain discourse with the gargantuan agate head. "As you know, the day that I died was the die I came back. Think about the Third Gate that the Watcher mentioned, the Steward's Gate—have you yet figured out what that is? Anyway, the manuscript must be published with the Council's seal of approval. Not for my sake, mind you—I'm a bit past such concerns—but for the galaxy's. If you think these are disconcerting times, darker days are yet ahead; people will need clarity and a reason for hope. I understand that it's hard to believe the things I wrote. But the truth is you don't need to go to Otherspace to encounter the supernatural. It's all around us if you'd but look and perceive; it's in the seemingly mundane things that you dismiss or destroy; it's there amongst the forests and hills; it runs along the rivers and drifts gently upon the lakes; it crests atop the mountains and dives deep into the seas; it's with the birds and the beasts and in the fields we know… it can be found in music, story, and art, and it's right there in the birth of your offspring and the love you show one another.

"That's all. I was never much one for speeches… Oh, and Graf-Well, I *did* write the entire document… but you're not altogether wrong: *I had help!*"

A kaleidoscopic band of translucent lights penetrated the room, all emanating from the Bouncers' open mouths as they drew closer to the audience. Then, they swallowed them.

EPILOGUE

TRANSFORMATION

OF ARHUL HEXTROPHON

When, at last, I awoke from the sunless spheres of oblivion, the strange, tall man yet stood before me. He was arrayed in the archaic garb of the Core Worlds, which lent him a regal air, but his eyes disturbed me, for they were chatoyant and deep as fathomless gulfs, and I could not gaze long upon them for fear of losing what little grip on sanity I had left. In a resounding voice, he addressed me, saying: "I am Wutzek, Sovereign Servitor of the Eternal and Progenitor of Galactic Chaos. Rejoice, Kez-Iban, for you of all the beasts of the boundless provinces have been chosen."

The nervous suspension of the last few days and terror of my final moments commingled to produce an awkward response, clearly indicating I'd lost the connection between my misfiring brain and tongue as I sputtered indecipherably: "I don't understand. I thought… I thought they killed me. Who are you? What did you call me?"

"One who has returned from death," he replied, ignoring the rest of my addled questions. He stretched out his arm to me again as he'd done when the Shadow Beings had engulfed me, and in his hand appeared what looked like a segmented holocron. At that, I grew nervous, for it was a conical and rubescent ziggurat.

The holocron then spoke in an odd language I'd never before heard, though I found I could understand it. It told me not to fear. At that, it grew, or perhaps I'd shrunk, to become a trapezoidal portal which my guide stepped through, and I then followed.

On the other side was the boundless firmament I'd known all my long years. The ziggurat that was now a door summoned forth a silver stream and said in his strange tongue that he was to be the vessel we were to sail upon. And he told us his ancient name, Splendid Ap, and at last I understood that he was the Avatar of Time, but not for the first time I wondered how I had come to be designated to take such a fantastic journey. Wutzek only said that such things were the Will of the Force.

So thinking it all a dream, for I had dreamt many strange dreams in my youth, I stepped onto the ship that was Splendid Ap, and the galaxy passed before my eyes in all of its splendor. We soared from the Core to the Colonies and the Inner Rim, then outwards to the Expansion Region and Mid Rim, scanning all the wondrous jeweled worlds in between. I scowled past the Corporate Sector before fleeing to the Tingel Arm and the circumambient Outer Rim, then through all the flagitious colors of the Flamewind, after which we wheeled past the wilds of Wild Space and into the disquieting and vast Unknown Regions where I marveled at the Rishi Maze and all of the storied Companions. From there, we floated out beyond the void, beyond the far stars of the neighboring Dwarves which, like Skyriver, war had irrevocably marred.

So we rode the stream, flitting the fork to the Gateway of Dimensions and Deeper Void, silent, infinitely dark, and imposing, a place where nothing alive or dead had ever passed. There, I saw Wutzek's true form as he'd first shaped it, an aggregation of interlinked, glowing orbs that shifted and swayed like an assembly of lucent Will-o'-the-Wisps. "This is an unknown path to the Fields of Tomorrow," the cobalt orbs which formed Wutzek intoned, "the Unseen Realm which few have found, east of the suns, west of the moons. But first you must enter the Third Gate which opens to one of three realms where you will see all."

To my dismay, I was brought to that umber, indesecrate dimension wherein the cold, nethermost husks that were long-dead worlds floated like tombs in an interplanetary boneyard in space where the fallen luminaries had shrunken into silent, sorrowful cressets. Under that charcoal, crimson sky sailed the stream of time that was Splendid Ap, who told a great and terrible secret I cannot yet share, save that it was a word of renewal that recalled the fragrance of Lake Sah'ot during the vernal season and had only been uttered in the dead places when they had teemed with life long ago. My eyes widened when I thought I espied a blade of green open upon the hard, cold mass of rock, but the eidolon that was Wutzek only laughed in his echoing way that lit up his ever-shifting globules and said it was but a vision of the Reconstruction that takes place in the Restoration, long in the future. But I wondered if that meant now…

And we came to the great spiral causeway and sailed down into a long, moonless hollow that was reminiscent of an ancient burrow I'd crawled through when I was but a boy, but far deeper and drearier. This was the shaft of that great black hole that is Old Danda Sine, so called now for one who is cold no more, and the stream passed into its hoary mouth where ancient Wutzek kept silent until he said, "This is called the Chasm of Forever and is what became of Cold Danda Sine at his passing. It can be accessed through the Steward's Gate, but only few can return from it, as have those who reached beneath the Lake of the Gone Forever or in the Realm Beyond Shadows under the Lake of Apparitions."

The tunnel descended in a winding slope for what would have been ages in sunlit worlds. There had never been a sun here, and only the radiance of Wutzek's unearthly, cool-white orbs inexorably sailing on in the somber gloom gave me hope for an eventual release from the wreathing, starless passage that wound ever on in the benignity of Beyond Shadows.

At last, we arrived at a solemn canyon so immense the eye could not see the far wall or ceiling above, and I was told it had been set aside for those for whom time has ceased. Glaucous and sorrowful grey radiance illuminated but dimly the interior part of the colossal Chasm of Forever. Lined in rows, one upon the other with but a meter of space in between, and one next to the other with but a meter of space in between, for a million kilometers above and a million kilometers below, and a million kilometers to the north and a million kilometers to the south, and so too to the east and to the west, lay the prone figures of innumerable forms. This was how they were stacked

and arrayed, and only the stream ran through the midst of them yet did not touch any of the forms.

It recalled to my mind the sacrosanct Hall of Satabs on Ventooine, except that it contained every manner of sapient and sentient life, great and small, and not only of the birds and beasts and creeping things but of mechanical beings too, and I opened my mouth to inquire of it in whisper, but stopped, for it seemed to me that even the barest hush would boom forth like thunder in a valley that had never known rain. Voices did not sound here in the Depths of Eternity, save for the running of the stream that echoed always like the softly lilting canticle of far-off chimes.

Of Humans there were no few. I was drawn to one, to touch its form, but my hand passed through, and at that moment I saw before my eyes glimpses from the cradle to the grave of the being's life, whom I was shocked to recognize as one that I'd loved long ago. I fell into a deep melancholy then, both for he who'd died and for the life that might have been, as for the uncountable centillion in the uncountable aeons in which they'd resided in this sepulchral, grey-green chasm. I wondered how many arrived with each passing moment and whether their spirits were really here at the apex of the great black hole or whether this was but a Hall of Remembrance and Sorrow. And still nothing made a sound but the gurgling stream urging us on. *This is not our place*, Splendid Ap intoned in my mind, and I wondered at that too.

After we'd passed beyond the sacrosanct Depths, Wutzek would say that I should rather grieve for those who had not yet arrived. So I asked, "If that was the place for those for whom time has ceased, how can it be that the stream of time runs through?"

And the guardian who was my guide answered and said, "Because time moves endlessly forward, and forevermore are they safe, for corruption cannot enter these borders, and the umber shadow is barred."

"I tried to touch one, but my hand passed through, and I saw before my eyes his life from beginning to end, and I knew him but had not known he'd died."

"That which lives in memory can no longer be touched, but not a detail of a life is ever lost or strays. No love dies unsung…"

"What of the beasts? And droids?" I wondered aloud, mystified.

Wutzek smiled, but his words held a forbidding scorn. "In his vanity, Man imagines himself superior to all others, but that is the Great Lie. He has no superiority, neither over droid nor beast, for you are *all* beasts. You all came from the same source and are returning to the same source, all save for the vile, for they do not come here and do not depart for other shores…."

We next came to a distorted rent in space like a ruptured scar where the stream would not approach; neither would Wutzek venture forth, and it occurred to me that that tenebrific wormhole was once something else. It had been called *Aznak* before it was transferred and transformed. Now I was told to peer through the window of the ethereous horizon, but for a moment, to glimpse into that ghastly empery of Chaos, the termination place of all that was foul and could not be redeemed.

At that, my spirit left me, for I was in great distress to look upon such a dread realm, vast beyond measure, and it was some time before I ceased to shudder, but Wutzek

stood on patiently, and the ship that was Splendid Ap was silent, and even the stream ceased to make a sound. So, at last, I peered through the caliginous window of the event horizon, fearing even the most tenuous glance at the six impenetrable gates and its six serpentine keepers, the fallen gods of the Abyss, but I saw nothing at all. And Wutzek nodded his head sagaciously, and the ship and the stream of time carried us on.

Ap turned to a playful mood and said he would take us downstream to the great Pool of Living Dream past the one-way door where only those with the key have e'er returned, the spirits of those on errands for the moribund universe of old and the nascent universe of new. Into the Netherworld of the Force we sailed, soaring through the vortex of fog that stood as its gate upon a haven of cool, soft lights that reflected in varying gradations and nebulous wisps with yet a twinge of sorrow to color its edges; a dominion of deep calm it was, open to realms of Dream and the Unseen.

Wutzek said this was the place crafted by the windings of El'Shuddem and that we could observe but for a short while. Beyond a spatial divide into a furtive dell of yellow and sage luminance could be seen the hoary Force-users of days gone by, Jedi and those of the many traditions who used the Breath for the furtherance of life. They worked alongside the M'ust and other loyal First Ones for whom immeasurable joy had returned. In the phantasy of my delusion, as I still believed it must be, past the trellises of lambency I thought I espied a wizened, olive-colored gnome who I'd once met in a marshy land aeons ago. My eyes must have widened in surprise, for the gnome winked mirthfully at me, but Wutzek spoke then, and the old Jedi Master disappeared into the solemn crowd of learners and colleagues: "These are to be the Sovereign Servitors presiding at dawn in the Fields of Tomorrow where the Celestial silhouettes now dance in euphoric preparation for those to come under new stars."

Moving on, we alighted upon a giant crevasse behind which formed a wall of charged particles standing at the uttermost breadth and depth and height, descending incrementally to the movement of its own clock whose hands no mortal can count. We crossed over a gap of multitudinous angles that looked like shards of glass where a being of heliotropic bioluminescence in abstract and ever-changing form introduced himself as the Avatar of the Hourless. He would carry us through the portal to that extrasidereal Unseen Realm, for time could not yet take us, though I saw that tributaries of the stream still abounded. The heliotropic nebula said that the name it was known as beforetime was Horliss-Horliss.

We were borne along into an illimitable atlas of stars I'd never known called the Ocean of Lights, and another glowing stream joined us who said he was Hidden Pithem, and he playfully moved around before and behind us, though we did not sail upon his stream but over it.

We passed by a yawning expanse of wildly flexural nebulae surrounding and penetrating a universe lit by a supernal luminary from above and populated by variegated, incandescent beings of diverse and changing form, cyclic and star polygons, annulus and arbelos, triquetra, pentapodes, lemniscates, and countless more which flew hither and thither as lambently shining stars, for they had been newly lit and would be ever lighted by the empyrean brightness of above.

Spherical sounds echoed in the spaces in-between, resplendent and venerable like the first songs at the start of time, but also like new compositions never before heard. Wilder colors abounded and formed, and *life*—as it had never been—sung to its resonant and fathomless chords deep in the firmament of the Fields of Tomorrow. There, at the aperture of the Galaxy of Dreams, stood the great King Sunn-Childe; a beatific countenance he wore as he waved and greeted us like old friends while we entered unto the glorious forests and parks and conurbations like none other before it.

Marching in procession to that field from all four corners, each of which had a sentry, one of air, one of water, one of fire, and one of earth, came a host of the Firstborn and a myriad of their offspring races, some who had not been seen since the earliest ages, and all who appeared now in glorious mien and garb: the Osserians with their offspring races, the Kwa and their offspring races, the Asmerukii with their offspring races, the Xaczhick and their offspring races, the Arbrans and their offspring races, and so many more; and in the great waters swam in procession the aquatic Precursors and their offspring races. And soaring above were avians of all shapes and kinds.

Enormous beyond comprehension was that field, greater than any that had ever been, and yet no corner of it was without illumination and beauty and sound, though with grace and not fury did the lights of the Celestials bound and caper, and the Force resonated in strength and joy to the ethereal winding rhythm of the dancing suns and all which they lit. Even the fixed stars were permitted to leave their orbits to dance beside them, including three that looked like planets but with impossible faces, one of which was of deep emerald and bright blue who dandled his cold, cobalt waters into that of a mischievous smile as if to remind me by means of a sign.

In the midst of them, in artless abandon, pirouetted the colossal eidolons of two beautiful women like nymphs in flowing pallas of filigreed weft, or carytids with long, pythonic hair of fabulous saltant coils; one in verdigris; the other alabastrine. Alike to sister dryads in orchidaceous damask did these immortelles seem… Spirals and swirls lit upon Horliss-Horliss, which Wutzek, also aglow, said was indication of the laughter and love that was the symptom of the universe.

"Why do they dance?" I thought to ask.

Ebulliently, Horliss-Horliss replied, "Because they are whole and reunited at last, mother and daughter, with all their lost loved ones who have come home."

"What is this place?"

"It is the Restoration in Tomorrow's Fields," said the gleaming Wutzek, "where the Reconstruction is underway, the New Universe, where the Firstborn and their Children will come to reside when the stream of time breaks forth like a torrent to carry them. But of the remorseless slayers, recreant prevaricators, paramours of greed, and defilers of innocence, they are vanished forever, and the Shadows are no more. Those who arrive here dwell in heir to wisdom, compassion, justice, and strength so that not even the memory of evil will cause harm or taint these fields."

Past the warming incandescence, we were briefly carried upon Horliss-Horliss as upon solar winds to catch the undulations of the ever-running stream and ship that was Splendid Ap who governs the doors and passageways to and fro, and then Horliss-Horliss bid us farewell. I asked if we would follow the stream and was told that the

stream ran forever on, but it was time to move on from it, though I found that strange since the stream itself was time. But Splendid Ap, who was nearby, read my mind and laughed again in that odd language of numbers and dials before he too parted ways for a time, though I thought I saw another tributary appear.

At last, or at first, for time had ceased meaning for me now that the Guardians of Time had departed, I asked how we were to sail on without current or stream. But then, the star-lines rotated back and forth, and blinked once and swayed, and I appeared in a lovely, beach-wood paneled room with the sun streaming in through a large bay window that opened upon a garden of redolent flowers and herbs.

Ancient statuary dotted the arbour amidst the trellised vines and moss-grown, gambrel roofs. Carven marble rails appeared in the distance betwixt the tall, dreaming hills and fragrant, sweeping orchards that ran down glades to fertile valleys of wildflower, butterfly, and bird. And I could hear the creak of the cricket and cries of the Silverwing and recalled, at once, that I stood in my former house overlooking Lake Sa'hot on Chandrila as I had back when I'd been a living man—for it occurred to me then that I was no longer. The thought didn't frighten me as it would have then, though a touch of despondency did press upon me for an instant, for there were things I had not done that I would have wished to, but Wutzek said to, "Take heart, for the noble doors are never closed for those who choose compassion over self."

As if in response, I was transported to the home of my youth. The three Sisters reached up proudly as they had once long before. Fields of magnificent wildflowers, with no trace of weeds, burst with color in the distance. Romping and trotting upon the warm and verdant fields were an assortment of jubilant beasts, a great canine, various Tusk Cats, a Mooka, and a Cracian Thumper.

It was a wonder to gaze again upon the familiar faces and places. Sweet smells wafted off the lolling waters that fed the pastures, bringing with them reminiscences of olden times. As I drew nearer, I could hear voices of mirth coming from the house, and I instantly knew they were of family and friends long since departed. While yet I reveled in these sights, sounds, and smells, I understood now of their portent and longed for the Fields of Tomorrow in which such things would be, when the Celestial bodies dance in the luminal firmament to the new song that was also old before time, imparting euphoric abandon for all, not just the few, alongside days and nights of peace without end or anything to mar or spoil them.

Wutzek appeared again as the tall and handsome man, still attired in the formal and archaic garb of ages past, though he seemed younger now and more carefree and said that I must record all the things I'd seen and heard, for I was to complete the scroll I'd started long before. I thought then to ask what I had become and how long it had been, because I could no longer tell.

Wutzek smiled and said that I had become his adopted offspring to replace another that was lost to bedlam. I started to mention that there were three such that he had lost, though I surmised then that they were lost no longer and realized it was a symbolic gesture. Then I knew who the other would be, which caused me no small degree of mirth, for the thought of that one roaming the stars was something few would believe.

THE TRUTH ABOUT LEGENDS

As Hextrophon's story ended, so did it begin…

The firmament that had before come alive with aureate bursts of exuberant color now settled to amaranthine. And if one listened closely, they could just barely discern the haunting strains of some ebullient chord.

"Cuenyne, if you're ready…" Hextrophon said.

"Are you kidding?" the droid's disembodied voice responded. "I've been waiting my whole life for this…"

Some in the crowd began to scan for him again or looked to the stars in longing, for they had not just heard Hextrophon's epilogue but experienced it through his eyes. The astromech truly was no longer amongst them. Then, in a moment, the second head of the double-helix drew back and shook, and in that scolding voice that was Q9's said to those watching: "And *don't* make me come back!"

Then the lights pulsed, and all turned to silver and white. The Council chamber returned to itself. Wild-eyed and in shock, the audience stared at one another, unable to speak for long minutes. Some smiled; others openly wept, and a few even embraced. Plenty scowled, still convinced it had been an elaborate hoax perpetrated by Q9 and possibly Hoole or Na'al, but even they had to acknowledge that it was well done. It went down on record as the most exciting meeting any Historical Council had ever had.

Unsettled and reflective, Janzikek quietly asked: "What is this 'Third Gate' he spoke of? And where does one find it?"

"It inevitably finds us," said Hoole soberly. "*Death* is the gate. What it opens depends on the road we'd travelled, light or dark… That is why it is called the Steward's Gate."

Hextrophon's book was published with nearly all of the Council supporting it. It was met with wilder and louder controversy than most had expected, with opinions weighing in on all sides, but it was the Council's biggest-selling work of all time, topping charts normally reserved for more mainstream titles. Ironically, it kept the Historical Council alive, prompting a renewed wave of interest in the study of history. The Administration, which had indeed considered slashing funding to the organization, was forced to reassess that idea in the face of the renown and import afforded the Council by a populace sparked into fascination with all eras of the past and in search of clues to the future and hope for what it all might mean.

THE END...

APPENDICES

"In their so-called wisdom, modern sapients have convinced themselves that since morality is subjective and relative, it is difficult if not altogether impossible to distinguish good from evil. That is their misfortune, as for any who choose to believe the lie, for it takes but one's heart to see the difference:
This is the Light: Preserve life, Support life, Aid life in attaining its destiny.
This is the Dark: Extinguish life, Injure life, Impede the development of life."

~From *The Celestial Record, "The Role of a Steward"*

CULT ENCOUNTERS

INTRODUCTION TO CULT ENCOUNTERS

The following material, termed *Cult Encounters*, has been excerpted from a lengthy treatise by historian Arhul Hextrophon written in the years prior to his mysterious death at his home on Chandrila. Following his retirement, Hextrophon spent an increasing amount of time gathering and sorting through the extensive volumes of material he'd collected over the decades from fellow researchers and while on voyages to mysterious sectors of known and unknown corners in the galaxy. Hextrophon's treatise examines several occurrences centered on the beliefs of obscure cults and their correlations to the mythologies of ancient and vanished peoples.

The renowned historian was fascinated by certain elements that, on the surface, appeared unrelated but which he felt contained bizarre and sinister strains of interconnectedness. It should be noted that several historians of the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances have expressed misgivings over the validity of Hextrophon's conclusions, and though few have examined his entire body of work to collate the evidence he put forth, some have already dismissed his post-retirement work as "conjectural," "unsubstantiated," and "apocryphal."

Your Faithful Servant,
Wolam Tser

THE FOLLOWING WAS READ ON DAY ONE OF THE HISTORICAL COUNCIL MEETING

In the years since my retirement as Master Historian, I've been free to pursue enquiries apart from the mandates of government-funded projects. Mon Mothma had seen fit to ensure I had a sufficient stipend to allow me to chase after the more unusual subjects that held my interest: ancient Pre-Republic races, lost civilizations, and the unknown origins of sapient life in the universe.

In this particular mission, I must admit to some misgivings and more than a little trepidation on the part of those closest to me, for I've begun to unearth a picture of a far-distant time—a "tapestry of myth" some would call it, but a cosmogony, nonetheless—based on interconnected accounts, cultic lore, and a number of hitherto unexplored, ancient civilizations. Research such as this encroaches on areas of the metaphysical that some consider outside the parameters of the scientist or historian, yet to such sentiments I can only say that just as it is the journalist's duty to uncover present truths, no matter how odd or disagreeable they may be, so too is it the historian's duty to uncover the past, no matter how unfamiliar or unknown the path is.

That is not to suggest that there is not a cost involved. By infringing on the domain of those who've held long-guarded secrets, in probing the immemorial veil of the ages into mysteries unnameable, I have brought upon myself the attention of malefic eyes. Yet, so it must be, for that is the commission: to record and publish the data, to draw together the strands that form the web of truth in this universe, to open a window into the vast gulf of epochs past. I leave it to my readers to look beyond the present, mundane notions of reality and see what the evidence reveals.

Religious extremism has always made for fascinating study, at least to one whose mind is wont to haunt the sacrosanct halls of antiquity, cogitating over the sociological mutation of races and peoples in the vast, inexorable march of time.

Our galaxy has seen a multitude of singular and spellbinding examples of cultic movements. There are the Dim-U Bantha Priests, the Nuns of G'aav'aar'oon, the Ancient Order of Pessimists, the Fellowship of Kooroo, and the Church of the First Frequency. More macabre examples include the Cult of M'dweshuu, the bizarre Cult of Waru, and the Church of Infinite Perception. Some are created by accident, such as Han Solo's Cult of Varn, while others are designed with an agenda, such as the Cult of the One and the All created by the Besadii Hutts.

Despite a multiplicity of differences, most cult members share at least this collective belief: they have an obsessive devotion to a person or principle, and the object of that devotion often appears aberrant and mysterious to the modern-day galactic inhabitant. The Followers of Quay, for instance, center their worship on a precognitive children's toy, whereas the Amaran Sisterhood devote twelve hours during the vernal equinox to fertility rites in honor of the Hoojibs of Arbra.

Though unusual, most cults are relatively innocuous, requiring little more than reclusive solitude or fetishises in which to practice their unorthodox beliefs. But there are other affiliations, those spoken of only in hushed tones and the fables of childhood—though fables they are not. There actually exist caliginous orders of the profane, baleful Dark Side congregations croaking vitiated liturgies of Sith lore in dismal, subterrane vales and legend-haunted peaks. The Shapers of Kro Var bear close scrutiny, as do the noxious Sorcerers of Rhand—of whom the late Lord Cronal claimed membership—hidden as they are behind myth in the far-off stellar clusters of the Nihil Retreat. Yet even these pale into prosaic when measured against the shadow of elder days when wild things roved the black recesses of space, the fiendish, insensate powers who held dominion over the sapient Firstborn.

For now, however, let us discuss the following unusual sects, of which certain facts have come to light. Each demonstrates seemingly unique forms of reverence, nomenclature, and practices. Yet, grotesque and incomprehensible as they may seem, there are connections, distant strains of commonality, echoes of repeated notes, resounding tones made more astonishing because of their separation by vast leagues of stars and even further distances of time.

THE GUILD OF VINDICATORS

The following communiqué was recovered from an Imperial record vault following the Liberation of Coruscant during the Galactic Civil War. New Republic Intelligence has ascertained that it's from the shadowy Imperial agent known as Blackhole. His identity long shrouded in rumor and speculation, Blackhole is now known to have been Lord Cronal, a mysterious figure working behind the scenes at Imperial Intelligence but serving his own agenda. For a number of years prior to the Battle of Yavin, he'd operated as head of that organization, where he was given a measure of impunity and position that even Armand Isard—who formally ran Imperial Intel until his daughter's betrayal—did not command.

Lord Vader, I bid you dark greetings.

At your behest, I have infiltrated the accursed Guild of Vindicators in an effort to unlock their secrets and unmask their weaknesses. They never knew a servant of the Emperor was amongst them. With the Dark Side as my ally, I was able to mimic their own unique powers enough to convince them of my place in their organization. They are zealots, and like all fanatics, they suffer from an unwavering belief in the righteousness of their cause. Such rigid arrogance is their blinder, a flaw that I am certain would be easy to exploit should the time come to do so.

The Guild of Vindicators is comprised of a relatively small cabal of self-appointed vigilantes with unusual and mysterious Force powers unlike those we have seen in other traditions. They believe it their duty to impose punishment upon those they perceive as having committed great evils; prime amongst these are individuals who have "misused the Force," as they say. Thus, their chief adversaries have been various Dark Side cults and acolytes, against whom they have long engaged in battle. In that they have kept would-be usurpers entangled in plots and skirmishes, they serve the Emperor's purpose to remain as they are. Should they later prove too victorious, however…

The Guild was first brought to my attention while I was yet serving as a Prophet of the Dark Side, for they had targeted the Prophets for extermination. It amused me to note that in their dark hooded raiment and self-righteous, judgemental hatred, they much resembled the very Darksiders they despise, hypocrisy that as you well know existed in the Jedi of old.

The Guild is categorized into several branches, each named for the power wielded by that branch. Their abilities are intriguing, a utilization of the Force that seems to belong to neither the light nor Dark Side but stemming from the realm of shadow that lies at the borders of each. Their distinguishing mark is a skull-stone pendant. Members wear it around the neck to signify adherence to the primary principle of the Guild. The skull, of course, is the signifier for death—the ultimate penalty for transgression.

Guild members are comprised of various genders from numerous races, though human and human-related species seem to dominate the primary branches. Abilities vary from member to member, but all utilize their powers for the same purpose. Each member of the Guild is trained to delve deeply into the victim's memory to uncover acts of violence, injustice, or cruelty committed in the past. As a rule, they do not take life from those judged adversely. There are some exceptions, like the rust-furred Lepi known as Kezzin, exiled from the Guild for bludgeoning to death a fellow member with his bare foot. Most members, however, need never raise a fist or weapon in battle. Their powers compel perpetrators to become their own punishers, a distinction—they believe—that keeps them from being sullied by the sins and crimes of their prey.

The primary branch of the Guild is occupied by those known as the Shamers—a group headed by a man named Clat, who is the cardinal leader of the entire organization. Shamers have the power to create feelings of extreme remorse over past wrongdoings. Thoughts of suicide are introduced as the sole means to expatiate one's conscience.

So compelling are the suggestions of guilt and self-annihilation, they override the victim's natural sense of self-preservation.

The Unveilers utilize similar guilt-inducing suggestions, influencing those they've judged to publicly admit their crimes and offer no resistance when punishment is administered—even when that punishment means death. Several of these have infiltrated the law professions of various Core World firms. The Guild are delusional enough to believe that one day all of the galaxy's judges will be made up of Unveilers!

Those known as the Redeemers handle the few the Guild feels are not yet beyond rehabilitation. Their tactic: erasing their quarry's mind. This branch is the most altruistic. They are surprisingly secretive, and I was unable to uncover how discriminating this power is amongst them. It is said that some can erase the memory of a single crime, while others the entire memory, removing all knowledge of family, friends, and the past. They deem this a mercy since it spares the life of their victims. Redeemers are convinced that this ability to give wrongdoers a clean slate should be applied to all of the galaxy's criminals. The official creed of the Guild places high value upon Redeemers and their gifts, but the truth is that the leaders of the Guild have little real patience for their ideals. In turn, there is a growing movement of Redeemers who seek to break away from the Guild, believing its leadership to have become cynical and bloodthirsty. It is my belief that their powers are somehow connected to the Tsils, a sentient mineral-based lifeform who taught the Force-sensitive Theran Listeners on Nam Chorios how to remove unwanted memories.

The Reflectors are a much more vicious faction that focuses on violent criminals and those who have perpetrated larger-scale acts of destruction. Through the use of illusion, Reflectors force the criminals to suffer a reflection of their own violence as if through the eyes of those they'd slaughtered. A murderer might experience the terror of being stalked and killed, whereas a ruthless military officer might be forced to witness his homestead and family obliterated. Oftentimes, a Reflector will work with Splinterers or Shamers to add extreme guilt to the mix (and, invariably, suicide). I have discovered that several Imperial officials who had been reported missing were in fact destroyed in this fashion.

The branch closest to the Dark Side is the Splinterers. These take a wholly different approach to retribution. When the Guild deems death too lenient a punishment for a criminal, they send the Splinterers. This unique group often works in tandem with other branches, tracking and isolating targets, then shattering their victims' mental stability until their prey is reduced to catatonia and plagued by an unceasing succession of nightmarish hallucinations. The psychological trauma produced by such emotional torture is enacted as both a punishment and a means of keeping a victim unable to ever again harm another, as it renders them unable to function in society. The results are fascinatingly disturbing and quite impressive. Their actions, of course, produce a reverberating effect that brings the Splinterers closer towards the Dark Side. Could they be made to serve the Emperor, they would make for ideal Inquisitors.

The most potentially powerful, and the smallest in number, are the Annihilists. Specializing in punishing dozens, potentially even hundreds of offenders simultaneously, Annihilists are said to be able to produce inexorable feelings of paranoia and rage so intense that entire armies will turn on their own kind, eliminating one another without

hesitation or conscious thought. The Guild has claimed to have employed the skills of this branch in numerous conflicts over the years. In my time amongst them, they were spoken of only in whispers. It is my belief that such a group—if they even existed—are no longer extant, though I cannot verify this with any certainty.

The Guild of Vindicators have proved a fascinating subject of study worthy of future examination—particularly their abilities with the shadow elements of the Force. Where and from whom they obtained the key to these powers I was not able to ascertain, for Clat holds secrets he will share with none. But there are veiled wisps in the far reaches of the galaxy few have conceived, dwarf galaxies yet unexplored; and beyond the voids, a twilit domain of unnamable hordes seething in darkness, awaiting their strange stars to align. If, as I suspect, the Vindicators managed to penetrate these occluded realms, the secrets they brought back have proved most interesting.

It goes without saying that the Guild has categorically marked both you and the Emperor as targets for retribution and extermination. Though I have no doubt any such plans would be doomed to failure, I nevertheless advise caution.

Your Humble Servant,

Blackhole

Some years later, the Guild was severely crippled after setting its sights on Palpatine's apprentice, Darth Vader. The elder Guildsman, Clat the Shamer, conspired with Lady Dhol of Cheelit, who may have been coerced to aid in trapping the Dark Lord. Dhol and her people are themselves a subject of much speculation. Known publicly as the J'feh, it is my understanding, based on the sparse records I have been able to uncover, that this is a fiction invented by them to hide the fact that they are not evolved descendants of the harmless, extinct octopi native to Cheelit but are beings eerily similar to the ancestral Mimban idol, Pomojema. Known in ancient times as Typhojem, this being is believed to have hailed from a binary star known only as Zoth, an unknown realm thought to exist beyond the galaxy and which has an etymological connection to N'zoth (which can be transliterated as New Xoth), itself a disturbing implication.

After destroying the Shamer, Vader hunted down the remaining Guild members on Cheelit. Those left in the galaxy have since learned of their leader's failure and gone into hiding, much like the Jedi before them. There is no doubt Vader sent spies to infiltrate their sect in order to better learn their secrets, but whether they were successful or if the Guild converted them to their cause is not known at this time.

THE ORDER OF THE TERRIBLE GLARE

The following document appears to have been composed some time after the dissolution of the Secret Order of the Emperor during the early period of the New Republic. The sender is again Lord Cronal—codename: Blackhole. Master Skywalker agrees that the recipient is in all likelihood the Sith apprentice, Lumiya, as suggested by the

moniker used in the address and their former affiliations. What they'd uncovered is unflattering to the Jedi Order in the extreme. Given the passage of time, I don't believe it will be harmful to reveal these contents to those interested in ancient history, certainly not to the new Jedi Order, but as I sit and peruse Master Skywalker's copy of the Dark Side Compendium, I wait and withhold judgement until he's had the necessary time to examine it and proffer forth his opinion.

Dark Greetings, My Lady,

Having sifted through the reams of data-recordings and archives from the fortress on Dromund Kaas, I've uncovered numerous items of interest I know you'll be pleased to obtain when next we meet. But there is one item I think you will find of particular interest. You are the most cunning woman I have ever known, and I have no doubt you'll find a clever way to put it to use... No one besides us and the now vanquished Prophets of the Dark Side you helped eliminate have knowledge of this information, this secret which the Jedi Council had kept hidden for millennia! How the Prophets obtained it perhaps no one will ever know. Darth Sidious would have tortured them for months had he discovered they'd been keeping such a delicious scandal from him. Ahh, but what a debacle! I almost don't blame the Jedi for keeping it hidden, hypocrites though they are…

DATA RECORDING OF JEDI MASTER SIMIKARTY

[Transcribed from his speech before the assembled Jedi Council]

Everyone knows and celebrates the fact that it was the Jedi who ended the shameful Pius Dea rule on this historical day. What most of you may not know is that it was the Jedi who helped start it in the first place.

[Audible gasps and whispers]

Unpleasant as it is to know that a thousand years of persecution, bloodshed, and religious hypocrisy lie at the footsteps of our own short-sightedness and complacency, it is crucial that I inform you of this so that we of the Jedi Council remember what has occurred and must not be forgotten so that the Jedi of tomorrow may learn and benefit by it. To all else, let these events continue to be sealed lest our failure be exploited by those who would seek to do us harm.

The Republic was steeped in corruption, vice, and gross abuses, concerned more for the special interests of galactic mega-corporations and the funds they received from legal but unethical donations than for its citizens. The Jedi found themselves at constant odds with the senators they were tasked to work alongside and finally decided it was time to take more drastic measures and ensure that Supreme Chancellor Pers'lya was removed.

But who to replace him with? The spiritual purity, uprightness, and moral clarity of a man like Aldon Contispex seemed to align with the goals of the Jedi, and in turn he championed the Jedi as examples for the galaxy to follow. True, he was a member of the

Coruscanti Merchant's Guild, but it was in this role that he'd gained renown for his ethical practices. Also, he professed worship of the Goddess, but what of it? There were copious religions in the galaxy. Who could imagine that this seemingly modest faith, which decried corruption and immorality, would grow into the xenophobic and rapacious monster it did?

But if backing him was the Order's only mistake, it could be chalked up to a simple matter of misplaced faith. Tragically, it was not. In secret, the Jedi Order helped Contispex get elected, something they could not have done without having first conspired with the Pius Dea caliphate. If the general public could be forgiven for not knowing the deeper significance of Goddess worship, the same could not be said for those intimately associated with them. The Pius Dea were not just insular. They were vengeful and delusional, deeming the Outer Rim a realm of Chaos and those beings who lived there as outsiders and threats to peace. This was disguised by the fact that they accepted non-Humans into the faith, but a deeper examination would have borne out that such were never allowed positions of prominence. And, if they held an outward antipathy towards the Hutts, well, that feeling was certainly not uncommon in and around the Core.

The sacred creeds of the Pius Dea were said to have been channeled by the Goddess to the Malikha, the name given to their first religious leader, Queen Maeve, to whom the faith owes its very beginnings. Not just any woman, Maeve was the ruler of Drogheda at the time the Hutts raided her planet in the Kymoodon Era. Betrayed by someone close to her, Queen Maeve was taken into captivity by the Hutts, who proceeded to murder the Queen-Mother and her husband. Though they could not break her, it was said that she was debased and humiliated.

Goddess worship was ancient on Drogheda. It is an offshoot of Vianism which existed long before Maeve's time as a mystery-religion of which little is known. Dark rumors claimed that Drogheda's ancients practiced a bloodthirsty form of worship to the Vain Goddess, Onrai, and etymological links have been found to support the connection. During Queen Maeve's time, however, only a few young female adherents kept the Vianist faith alive, and it was a mere shadow of the old cultic rituals, little more than the games of youth who enjoyed dabbling in the taboo. It is said that Maeve had been one of these rebellious girls. What is known is that she resurrected the Goddess while in captivity, giving her back her teeth and a thirst for blood and vengeance.

Queen Maeve's writings—which she claimed were the channeled voice of the Goddess herself—are now the cornerstones of the Pius Dea faith, and by the time she reemerged as ruler of Drogheda, freed during the defense of her world, she was no longer merely queen but the Warrior-Queen Malikha, leader of the faith. She took on husbands and had numerous sons who helped spread the religion far and wide on Drogheda and beyond. Sagaciously, she gave the Goddess universal appeal, as several systems already incorporated Goddess worship of one kind or another, and this allowed a syncretic blending of traditions that proselytized the faith further and faster. Speculation amongst academics continues to be debated as to which facets were newly intro-

duced by Malikha, which were altered into new forms, and which draw connections to the ancient worship of the Vain Goddess Onrai.

Her texts are clear on one thing, however: the need for a holy war to rid the galaxy of its irredeemable elements by a purging of infidels without and apostates within. That the Council was aware of this is evident from a heated, if one-sided, debate that had been recorded—though little seen—in which two Jedi Masters argue that the Pius Dea held to a literal interpretation of their holy writ. The majority of Masters disagreed—against prevailing evidence—claiming that it was merely symbolic and that in either case, Contispex was a moderate who held to moral ideals but eschewed the more controversial aspects of his faith. The charges that his immediate circle was corrupt and in league with the legendary Malkite poisoners, assassins who are known to have hailed from the planet Malkii (one of the earliest worlds to have come under the sway of the Pius Dea faith and who even changed their name to honor the Malikha), the Masters dismissed as conspiratorial ramblings. And so Contispex was brought into power, and for many years, as his abuses increased and the purges began, the Jedi stood by him.

When Contispex's atrocities began to grow too large to cover up or dismiss, the Jedi Masters began to change their views towards him, but by then it was too late. Key positions in the government and military had become staffed by Pius Dea faithfuls. When his son succeeded him forty years later, the Council hoped he would be different from his father; if anything, he was even more rigid and obsessed. For the next thirteen years, the Jedi again remained silent as the Republic plunged into madness, given over to the fantasies of a fanatical cult who brought horror upon the galaxy in their striving for so-called moral purity. At last, at the end of this time, sanity took hold of the Jedi Order, and they left Coruscant for Ossus, much to the anger of the then reigning Contispex, who saw this as an affront to his righteous crusade. He wasn't alone in believing the Jedi should have stayed on Coruscant.

Although later portrayed in history as a Human—due in no small part to the xenophobia inherent in the High Human culture of the era—Master Carel Kapekos was born of a Sunesi mother and Siniteen father in the era of the Pius Dea; his parents were adherents of the faith, as was he when he was accepted into the Jedi Order. The Council did not then prohibit Jedi who served the Goddess from continuing to do so, a decision I believe was misguided.

Lest you think I am suggesting otherwise, Kapekos was a model Jedi. But he could not escape what his culture and upbringing had hardwired into him. He did not start off a fanatic, and he could see that the Pius Dea Crusades had gone too far. Yet, he bore no love for the Hutts either, as his Sunesi brain seemed to be able to recite the dates and occurrences of each recorded Hutt atrocity over the centuries. Even if the Crusades *had* gone too far, he believed that stopping the Hutts and other predatory races was the right thing to do. Kapekos also felt that the Jedi could rein in the worst of the Pius Dea excesses and serve as a model for how they ought to behave. To that end, he worked as a Knight Errant, protecting innocents from the terrible things that awaited them aboard the Pius Dea's giant Cathedral Ships.

Kapekos was respected on both sides, but naïve, failing to recognize that the Pius Dea were profiting from war with policies that rewarded Republic colonialists who went off to convert—and in many cases conquer—alien worlds, plundering alien treasures and artifacts that sold for high prices in the Core Worlds (yet another hypocrisy given the official dogma against what they deemed impure alien art). The Pius Dea made themselves fabulously wealthy, which was, of course, their motivation for sending marauders in the first place.

This was of lesser importance to Kapekos, who believed he could see the "bigger picture." On one of his missions, he received a series of visions that included the rise of a tenebrous army of adversaries borne from amongst the Jedi. As if this paranoia wasn't bad enough, he had an even darker vision of a nameless terror from beyond the Outer Rim. Kapekos became obsessed with uncovering recondite secrets of the past that would help stem the tide of this encroaching darkness, along with a failed attempt to convince the Republic to be vigilant and militarily strong. The Jedi were also unmoved, knowing that visions were open to interpretation and never specific enough to base actions upon, but they allowed Kapekos to hold to whatever views he felt were right.

In the final years of the Crusades, the Pius Dea Jedi came under suspicion.

It began when the Caamasi, a people we have long respected, allied with Alsakani leaders to plead with the Council to forsake their neutrality and help save the galaxy from the cruel domination of the Pius Dea. The Council agreed and began planting agents in the rank and file as well as within the deepest conclaves of the sect's strongholds. This meant, however, leaving Pius Dea Jedi and their companions in the dark.

Not long after, anti-Pius Dea sentiment began to spread in the Republic, for there were many who secretly despised the harsh rules imposed by the religious hierarchy. When the Pius Dea began scrutinizing its own worlds in order to hunt down those they deemed were spreading heresy or not living up to their rigid standards, they created even more enemies. When at last the so-called "heretics" declared themselves independent, the Pius Dea found itself split between the Faithful and the Renunciates, and war emerged anew.

This time, however, they were outnumbered. The Alsakani and Caamasi had recruited Hutts, Duros, Herglics, and other victims and adversaries of the Crusades. With the aid of the Jedi, there was a decided slant against the formerly dominant cultists. The last nail in the coffin came when the Bureau of Ships and Services covertly seeded Cathedral Ships with rogue navicomp codes, sending thousands of them along unknown Hyperspace coordinates. They were never seen again. The Pius Dea leadership reemerged at Uquine, and there they were summarily destroyed. Their reign of terror was over. But it was not the end.

Those Jedi who had been Pius Dea supporters were incensed. Foremost amongst them was Kapekos, who, being a Jedi Master, was wounded by the Council's lack of trust in him. But Grand Master Biel Ductavis was firm in his stance: abandon worship of the Goddess and remain a Jedi or leave the Order entirely. This only added insult to Kapekos' already injured pride, and he argued the right to his religious freedom. Was

he, who had kept an upright record and not participated in any of the atrocities committed by other members of the faith, to be held accountable for their actions? Had the Jedi forgotten that they themselves, a millennium earlier, had brought Contispex I and the Pius Dea into power? Yet, as with his earlier visions, it fell upon deaf ears.

On principle, he refused to abandon his faith and grievously departed the Jedi Order.

He was not alone. One hundred and twenty-six joined. These were termed "the Fallen." Of these, fifty-nine went off on their own paths. Some fell into vice, others into hopeless campaigns to try and reignite the faith. The other sixty-seven remained with Kapekos, designating him their leader.

But where would they go? And what would they do? If not for an odd occurrence, they'd have likely dispersed or abandoned their misguided beliefs and returned to the fold. But Kapekos received another vision, this time leading him to the planet Garn where one of the Cathedral Ships had just made an unexpected crash landing. All that remained of civilization on Garn were a few small towns clustered together and made up of fading pre-fabs in varying states of disrepair. Even in its prime, Garn was a desolate relic of a world, its towns surrounded by ancient ruins of indeterminate age and origin, beyond which sprawled a vast terrene of dismal grey rocks, ochre swamps with lethal fungi, and atrophied fields of diseased trees.

The crashed ship had few Pius Dea leaders, but onboard was a Force-sensitive adherent, a young man named Alquist Amon, who Kapekos would go on to train and befriend. The sixty-seven Jedi were hailed as saviors, though they wondered what they were now that they were no longer Jedi. Believing the Force had guided them there to fulfill his vision, Kapekos deigned to create a new Force tradition, one that would honor the best aspects of Pius Dea and keep vigilance across the stars. They would call themselves Shamans.

The Jedi Order returned to Coruscant. This was bitterly ironic for Kapekos now that he was no longer one of them, as the return to Coruscant was something for which he had once argued rather fervently.

The Order, however, was changing into something quite different. No longer content to be mere servants of the Force, the conscience of the Republic, or guardians of justice and peace, they were given newfound power that for centuries they had been bereft of. Across the Core, the Jedi were hailed as heroes and leaders. Grand Master Biel Ductavis himself replaced Contispex XIX as Supreme Chancellor. Kapekos was aghast and foretold that this would lead them down a path of arrogance and corruption.

For many years, the Shamans worked in secret. Freed from the Jedi's restrictions, they delved into new ways of utilizing the Force. The rest of the survivors of the Cathedral Ship sought to build homes upon their new barren world. Those who were technologically inclined were employed to create a vast and intricate computer system from which the Shamans could embark upon missions and attempts to trace the lost Cathedral Ships. To that end, the Shamans were content to remain on Garn's Cathedral Ship.

This was not the case for most of the other fifty-nine expelled Jedi, many of whom were using their abilities as vigilantes or to manipulate planetary systems, cheat at

newly reopened gambling dens, and steal priceless antiquities from museums and temples. Some of the Fallen had never even passed the trials, but the senators of the Republic, particularly those looking to see the Jedi removed from power, chose to not see the distinction. So did these exiled Jedi and Padawans become an embarrassment to the Order and to the Republic now ruled by a Grand Master.

One would have thought the populace wearied of domineering crusaders, but it was as if they felt a loss in the absence of the Pius Dea, a void they were looking to fill. In such a climate of spiritual vacuity and fear, the newly sanctioned Jedi Vindicators arose. Akin to the Jedi Guardians of old but closer in spirit to the Pius Dea Crusaders we had just conquered, the Jedi Vindicators were charged with tracking down and arresting the Fallen, a commission that came to be extended to all unlawful Force users.

The Jedi Vindicators started off detaining any renegade Force users they could find. In keeping with the regulations and laws of the Republic, they would be tried and punished accordingly. Yet after months of successful arrests, the prisoners escaped. Investigations revealed that they were aided in this by a Force user on the outside. The Jedi Vindicators vowed to recapture these renegades and pressed for permission to employ harsher methods. The Council, wanting this embarrassing escapade behind them, conceded to any plan the Jedi Vindicators might put forth.

It is not known what involvement, if any, he had. But despite lack of evidence, Kapekos was accused of having freed the imprisoned Fallen, and charges were brought against him and his followers for practicing heretical Dark Side powers, of attempting to create a rival Order to supplant the Jedi, of following the banned Pius Dea faith, and for being a threat to Republic peace. Kapekos was subpoenaed; he then sought to address these charges and correct them, trusting in the Jedi's impartiality and respect for truth. Alquist pleaded with him not to go before the Order, but Kapekos departed, unaware of the Vindicators' real purpose.

The Vindicators had gained reluctant approval from the Council to use a rare Force technique that would strip rogue Jedi of the Force so that they could never again use it. Some of the Masters decried this action, warning that to use the Force to damage or destroy another's Midi-chlorians violated the Living Force, but their voices went unheeded. To this day, we are not certain of all the techniques the Vindicators developed. As a pale breeze churned into an angry squall, so would grow the power and prestige of this invisible but effective sect. For the Vindicators, Kapekos and his apprentices were an affront to the Force itself, heretics and apostates deserving of the harshest recompense.

Kapekos came before them in good faith, but he was seized and arrested. The Vindicators tortured him with their techniques and ultimately blinded him to the Force. When he was finally released, he was no longer the same man. So brutalized had he been by the Vindicators that any attempt he made to call on the Force was met with crippling and excruciating pain. He returned to Garn, where it was said he could feel the blinding light of the Jedi from across the galaxy, and so his existence came to be one of perpetual torment. Filled with rage at the Council's betrayal, a desire for revenge followed his every thought. Some said he turned to the Dark Side; others claimed that he discovered

a hidden remnant of the Legions of Lettow; still others believed that the evil spirit of Xendor haunted Garn, communing with Kapekos.

All that can be discerned is that with the aid of Alquist and others, Kapekos learned and developed arcane abilities and powers wholly unknown to Jedi and Darksider. So Carel Kapekos transformed into something else and was no more.

He now designated himself Rur, an ancient word for open spaces and freedom, and a tribute perhaps to his new life on Garn free from the Jedi. Yet others say it was given to him by his followers who heard his loud commands when he addressed the crowds, for Kapekos' voice was said to have sounded like a great roar.

With himself as High Shaman, Rur restructured the shamanic order that would come to be known as the Order of the Terrible Glare or the Ordu Aspectu. The Terrible Glare was aptly named in mockery of the Jedi's light that had so wounded and betrayed him, but it was also a name given in honor of the Goddess, who in literature was depicted with the pinprick glow of a shining star in each eye, a mark of terror for any who would oppose her and her servants.

The writings of Rur became the holy texts of the Terrible Glare. They were insane, rambling documents filled with hints and cryptic intimations, warnings of an ancient and blasphemous portal on Garn, of a terrible god that once ruled there, and of a gateway to another plane of existence, a baleful place he called the Night Realm. The Shamans had a great pyramid built to house and control the gate, for it was there that Rur determined he would find the power he needed to save the galaxy from itself. "There were intelligences in this realm," he said, "beings of strange abilities who sought a foothold in our dimension." His writings said that they could never be allowed in, though whether through naiveté or accident, some came through; the *Rozzum*, he coined them from an old Sunesi word. Rur wrote that he could control the foul entities, and they in turn taught him the power of illusion and deception. Within his own keep, a hidden fortress on Garn, he had a private pyramid built, a smaller replica of the one housing the gate. Within it he could channel his thoughts to commune with the Rozzum.

The Vindicators' triumph over Kapekos had given them great prestige and influence in the Council, but their reputation soon soured and turned many against them, and those who opposed the Jedi came to Garn to join Rur at this time.

Word of the Terrible Glare reached our ears from Rur's second-in-command, Alquist. He came to Coruscant, claiming things had gotten out of control on Garn, that *demonic* entities were escaping through the Infernal Gate. The Vindicators were given permission to go to Garn to arrest Rur and his followers.

It was a trap, a deception to lure the Vindicators there. They suspected this and went anyway, anxious for a fight. Yet, Alquist had not lied. There were, in fact, entities on Garn that no citizen of the Republic had ever before seen. The things of children's stories dismissed so readily by adults proved to be as real and terrifying as they'd once imagined in their long-lost youth!

A new war had begun. United by a banner of resentment and hate, the Order of the Terrible Glare learned to use their combined powers to create vast Shadow Domes, great

pockets of darkness blotting out the Light Side of the Force for miles around. Within these vaulted canopies, defiled towers had been erected, and into them loathsome forms had come to dwell. Rur had crossed a line from which he could never return. Once he had warned us of nameless beings seeking to come from beyond; now, he welcomed them!

Through proscribed rites and caliginous lore, he and his followers were taught shadow powers by shadow beings from an outer realm. The whisperings of the Rozzum, those atavistic, abhorrent armies of pale squirmers and unmentionable things, had seduced and corrupted his mind. Other beings were reported too, horrific, winged, biting creatures out of dark legend that roared and chanted incessantly to their obscene, lost gods. But the Rozzum did the bidding of the Shamans, for they were trained to hunt down, slay, and devour Jedi in preparation for a greater war to come.

The Vindicators had been too proud and arrogant to think they could be defeated, convinced as they were that the Light was on their side, forgetting that the Force sides with life, not with armies. Into the ghoul-haunted lands of the Shadow Domes the Vindicators were lured, and there they were met with a flood of consuming hatred emanating from the tenebrous masses. It was then that the Shamans sprang the soul-snares, ancient crystal prisms with the power to transfer the mind and life-essence of a Jedi, ripping it from the destroyed body and imprisoning it within. But it was the way in which Rur procured them that froze the Vindicators' blood, for the soul-snares were not simply discovered or made. They were brought through the dark threshold as gifts!

At last, the Jedi Grand Masters arrived. Blood and madness exploded upon the stygian wastelands of Garn as both sides were decimated. It was described as the most monstrous battle the Jedi had yet fought, a holocaust of madness, carnage, and devastation that went on for months, costing the lives of thousands, Jedi, renegade, and warrior alike.

The Rozzum scurried back to those shuttered dens of eldritch chaos, the atramentous lands where stalk things that should not be. We shut the portal and sealed it for all time, glimpsing only briefly that strange and ghastly expanse on the other side. Many of the soul-snares could not be found, and the land was too dangerous for even the Jedi to remain searching. Garn has since been decreed a forbidden world, and we turned our faces back to the stars we knew.

Although it was a pyrrhic victory, the Order of the Terrible Glare was no longer a threat to the galaxy. Rur's body was never found. It is thought he perished in battle, but it seems more likely that he followed his masters through the doorway into that other dimension. There are Jedi who gossip that Garn yet houses remnants of the Terrible Glare and that it was but the first of others hidden in the far recesses of the galaxy, perhaps in the Unknown Regions or Wild Space. But if this is so, we've not heard. Space is vast, and the Jedi are few in number with too much to do without having to roam about blindly seeking phantom menaces.

When word first reached the Republic of the Jedi's internecine struggle, it was reported as a troubling internal affair. Undercover footage and interviews soon leaked, but even these framed the situation as a kind of holy war, and Supreme Chancellor Biel

Ductavis was crafty enough to spin the story in such a way as to say that Garn was the hideout of a violent Pius Dea terrorist group.

The truth of the Jedi Vindicators was now known to the Council, and they were disbanded. Never easy it is to return to the light once one has dwelt in the shade. What few Vindicators came back railed against what they saw as the Council's betrayal. As a result of their defiance, they were excommunicated from the Jedi Order entirely.

It is no small irony that they went on to become the very thing they had so vehemently fought against, a sect of Force-wielding vigilantes with arcane powers. But the Order would not repeat their mistakes and attempt to pursue them. So long as they left the innocents of the galaxy alone, we would leave them alone. Thus did the Guild of Vindicators arise, and in the shadows they continue to dwell, not truly dark but neither light—a grey cult of Force-mages blinded by their arrogance and extreme views.

It remains a black mark upon us sitting on the Council today that, wrapped up as we were in the needs of the Republic, we could not see these tragedies unfold, could not see that this was not the Will of the Force. Yet these errors need not forever bring reproach on us if we choose to learn from them. The Garn Conflict could not have begun without poor judgement on all sides.

Considering all this, is it then not the course of wisdom to eliminate the potential in future Jedi to mishandle such conflicts? It is no secret that for years I have counseled against taking in adult apprentices. Many of you have argued that the Council's admonishment against married Jedi having children was inappropriate at best and an affront to the Living Force at worst, contending that many of the great Jedi of old would never have been allowed into the Order if such a measure had been in place.

I do not disagree. Yet we must learn from the past, not live in it! The Pius Dea Crusades showed us how extremism can bring about a reign of terror. Kapekos demonstrated how one's ties to the past can put a Jedi in conflict with his duties in the present just as the Vindicators demonstrated how easy it would be to create a Jedi Dynasty that would rule the galaxy with an iron fist. If we wish to assure the galaxy that we are not attempting to take over the Republic, we must change.

An Initiate should know only the Temple, the Code, their Masters, and fellow students. Ideally, for this to be the case, training should begin prior to the age of three, before one forms strong loyalties and emotional bonds with family, friends, and home worlds. I would see this rule one day become as inviolate as the Jedi Code itself. To avert other problems that would arise from a sudden move in this direction, this change must occur over a gradual period of time in order for the peoples of the Republic to grow accustomed to the practice and necessity that we must impose. Families of Force-sensitive children will not readily give them up, but if a life of dedication at the Temple is deemed a great honor and a noble sacrifice for the galaxy, they will more readily submit. The Senate will understand that it is for the good of the Republic that we do this and will aid in this endeavor.

We are fortunate that the government remains largely unaware of the Jedi's role in having brought the Pius Dea to power, not to mention the catastrophe that occurred on

Garn. That world is far off from the heart of the Republic, and what news reached the Core was quickly forgotten in the torrent of other issues closer to home. Thus, it's my recommendation—and the Council agrees—that we continue to seal these records. Only those granted a seat on the Council should ever be apprised of their secrets, and in this way will they benefit from the mistakes of our past.

We of the Jedi Council: rejoice in the future and a restored Golden Age that a new Jedi Order may yet usher in! May the Force be with us all!

SEEKERS OF THE SOULWORM

Since my retirement, I've traveled far and wide in search of the legends, mythologies, and religions of immemorial and long-vanished races. I have, in recent days, begun putting together the pieces of a cosmogenic puzzle, and in this endeavor have been given tremendous aid from fellow archivists, historians, adventurers, and lovers of truth. I received reams of epic poems from famed explorer and archaeologist Mungo Baobab. I inherited the master database of millennia-old texts from Professor Oron's daughter on Delari Prime. Among the exquisitely ancient and priceless artifacts dug up on Attahox, R'khemas University Professor Miska Tonique uncovered an obscure myth cycle, which she is sharing with me as she translates it. The Mistress Mnemos supercomputer on Fusai is likewise providing a composite picture of what appears to be a creation myth consistent with the discoveries made by Director of the Institute for Sentient Studies, Tamaab Moolis, respected anthropologist Mammon Hoole, and xenoarchaeologists Corellia Antilles and Fem Nu-Ar, all of whom have delved in the circles of the esoteric. And, of course, my faithful droid companion, Cuenyne, has aided me in ways too many to recount.

What scant evidence I've been able to gather suggests a fragmented commonality between certain primordial myths and forgotten myths regarding pernicious, clandestine cults worshipping a corrupt pantheon of chthonic forces. Little concrete data links the isolated sects within the fringe sectors of the galaxy, but I have come to believe that Soulworm cults, though extremely rare, are amongst the most disturbing and deadliest of any in the known universe. The origin of their belief in evil gods and their extradimensional allies is only now being considered, but if the recovered texts are to be believed, maleficent entities of similar description and behavior were known and venerated aeons before the dawn of the Republic and the birth of the hyperdrive.

Discernable in the unfolding narrative is that at its beginnings lie a race of beings that appear to correspond to what a number of lost civilizations have referred to as the Celestials. So far removed from the known elements of time and space, it might be said they were among the first to roam the newborn galaxy in the lonely gulfs when the stars were yet young. The legends go on to detail a terrible universe-wide cataclysm that coincides with the rise of hideous and cyclopean entities that correlate with those mysterious alien progenitors referred to as either the Old Ones or the Architects or both, though there is some confusion with the latter term, which appears to have been applied to another later group of benevolent beings. The more

ancient of the two were generally regarded as a malignant pantheon through which came widespread violence, war, and destruction. I have a lead that, should it prove true, will clarify matters and reveal the secrets of our long-forgotten past.

Former Chief of State Leia Organa Solo has been instrumental in providing me with the Gung Slab needed to understand the origins of the strange beings described in the fragmentary legends of this primeval and enigmatic myth-cycle.

In the early years following the Battle of Yavin, she, Han Solo, and the Wookiee, Chewbacca, ran afoul of one noxious cabal of Soulworm cultists calling themselves the Five, ostensibly named for its five members, each of whom appeared Human and possessed extrasensory abilities. These powers enabled them to enter the minds of Solo and Organa, where they implanted disturbing illusions, waking nightmares that mimicked reality with strong emotional resonance.

Had Chewbacca not intervened in freeing a mysterious, heretofore unknown being of awesome power that destroyed the Five, their deaths would have been certain. While some have argued that psychopathy lay at the root of the cult's cruel and barbarous torture, documents have come to light which indicate that the elicitation of physical and emotional pain is implemented for supernatural, cultic purposes—namely, to feed off the waves of suffering that emit from intense negative emotions. Once sated by the victim's agony, derangement, and eventual destruction, the cultists believe their demonic eidolons will, by gaining strength, move closer to reclaiming the galactic throne and bestow on them the rewards of knowledge and power.

In addition to this cult's mental abilities, there are questions regarding the bizarre colossal ship the Five dwelt in as well as the wand they wielded called the Black Fireclaw, which shot obsidian rays that devoured its victims in seconds. The origin of such artifacts remains unknown, though cultic lore offers cryptic hints involving a distant plane of existence, an inverted galaxy said to be the dwelling place of their obscene divinities. Various old legends speak of this *other* dimension as a realm bordering our own, a galaxy of dark stars and black holes where old gods writhe in their sepulchral worlds awaiting the day of their eventual return.

It must be said that were it not for Skywalker and the Solos reporting such extraordinary encounters, the connections between such fantastic and hoary myths would be decidedly suspect. But the veracity of their testimony is unassailable.

Based on this strange lore from antiquity, the beings the Soulworm cultists worship can be grouped into two trinities of greater and lesser deities. The lesser are designated as such due to their abilities as well as their arrival later in the cosmic narrative and are regarded as possible offspring of the greater deities—of which four are paramount, though only three are revered. The fourth appears to have been written off as a betrayer, which would explain why his name has been expunged from the manuscripts, with mention of him punishable by death.

Beyond these, there are three of which I have scant information, though what little I've uncovered I will catalogue here.

Typhojem/Pomojema

"The Left-Handed God" is a reference identifiable with Typhojem, the primary deity of the pure-blooded Sith race, who was said to have killed a god with his left hand. Due to disturbingly striking similarities to the Mimban demon, Pomojema, as well as to an entity found depicted on age-old stone carvings on Kabus-Dabeh, it is believed that the names Typhojem and/or Pomojema (translated from Archaic Mimban as *The Great Priest*) are but epithets for a pelagic grotesquerie, ichthyoid in semblance and considered so malevolent by those who worshipped it, he is seldom referred to even in their writings. This superstition likely accounts for the creature's various appellations, and it may have been unholy (or impossible) to pronounce its original name. Unburied relics, sarcophagi lids, temple walls, and statuaries extant on Almas, Korriban, Khar Shian, and Gap Nine confirm the appearance of Typhojem as a squat, tentacled, blood-soaked abomination with clawed wings.

Gorog

One of the primordial gods of the Killik Dark Nest is "Gorog the Night Herald," a name that can be traced to the myth-cycle of the Soulworm cultists as Thargorograht, the Night Queen. This being is associated with the proselytization of galactic inhabitants to the Dark Side and is also the procurer of slaves. Gorog is usually depicted as an enormous, winged, violet-blue scarab that commands vast hives of insect servants and is guarded by a host of winged sorcerers. In her appellation as the "Night Spirit" on the Endor moon, she was once worshipped by the native Dulok tribes and reviled by the Ewoks. Stories tell of her possession of the Shadowstone and her enmity with Hexprax, who controlled the movements of the sun. Hexprax is known and feared by the Duloks. The Night Spirit was said to have disappeared into the void, but other accounts indicate that she was destroyed. The Wizards of the Night Spirit incessantly buzz and roar in litany to their lost goddess.

Ooru

Little could be found to corroborate "Ooru" or various designations that depict the third of the lesser deities in the cosmogony of the Architects until the remains of the Charon Death Cult ship, *Desolate*, were explored and its treasures examined. Descendents of the Charr Ontee who had been flipped into Otherspace during the Rift Disaster in the Kathol sector, the Charon had found a new home in that strange dimension. But, as their new world was slowly ravaged by the proximity of a black hole, the race began to suffer deleterious mental effects. The first to succumb was their commander, who transformed into the delusional "Prophet of Death." He decreed that because life was an abomination, death must be spread to all living creatures. With only sublight engines, the Charr Ontee were confined to their star system(which, in their derangement, they believed to be the entire galaxy). As evil

fate would have it, their planet lay on the fringes of a cluster of inhabited planets, and over the course of centuries, war raged across them.

The Charon saw fit to pillage valuables from the civilizations they conquered, included the historic records of some of those races. Philologists and linguists attempting to crack the codes of these unknown writings managed to translate engraved pictorializations pertaining to a debased civilization who worshipped a bloodthirsty divinity transliterated as *Ooradryl*. I believe it is this being that corresponds to Ooru, but there is yet another possibility.

Ooradryl is a cunning, leech-like monstrosity of indeterminate substance clothed in iridescent scales that form a colossal, geometric cube. He is a god of both healing and devouring. The engravings depict a vast populace bowing before Ooradryl as he bestows blessings in exchange for the sacrifice of chosen individuals whom he feeds upon as a delicacy. Descriptively and etymologically, Ooradryl bears an uncanny resemblance to the transdimensional being known as Waru, who Luke Skywalker encountered on Crseih Station, and given the similarity in appearance, behavior, and nomenclature, it is very likely the same creature or an entity related to it. The implications of this will be discussed in a later publication.

Kopa Khan

It is surprising that far less is known of the so-called greater deities, also grouped as a trinity, but there appears to be several reasons for this, not least of which is their antiquity. Nevertheless, evidence exists for widespread worship of these beings.

The most well-known of these is Kopa Khan. Although appearing in various forms, this god can be found on several ancient, pyramidal structures throughout the galaxy such as the Dark Side Pyramids of Zabba II, the hieroglyphs of Alashan, and inscriptions on the Kwa Star Temples. Despite the varying sobriquets (Kol D'da Shan, Co Pana Cine) the translation is the same, referring to the sacrilege of a dying star. Kopa Khan is the Blasphemous God of Death and Dying. Originally said to have come from foreign stars (along with the two others that accompany him), Kopa Khan later vanished and is said to have either moved on to other worlds or to have died himself. The prophetic language used in the legends declares he will return again one day. The genocidal Lortan Fanatics, who ravaged the Yushan sector in the Reslian Purge, were Kopa Khan cultists who believed their god would manifest as a hybrid Human-Hutt.

The Inscrutable One

The second deity of the greater trinity is intertwined with the other two but is not generally worshipped and acts more as a principle or symbolic elemental. "Ab'aci" (alternately known as Ibon'aci, Ap'aci, Aforgomon, or simply Ap) is "The Inscrutable One" and the master of time, geometrics, and numbers. He was said to be the first to bring the knowledge of technology and weaponry to the universe. Ruins of an incalculably ancient Star Temple on Dathomir bear markings of dedication to him.

Derivations of this deity's name can be found in the words "time," "infinity," "aggregation," and "portal" in various ancient languages.

The Soulworm

The primary deity in this linked trinity is the Soulworm. Also translated as "Eternal Burrower," it has been seen in cuneiform inscriptions from worlds as remote as Leritor, Ch'hodos, Alashan, Dathomir, and Seoul 5. Referencing a deity sometimes called El'Shuddem or Shupnikkurat, a loathsome carrion worm of cyclopean proportions, the Soulworm is depicted in various forms; at times as a massive, tentacled black cloud, while at others with a single or even multiple heads, anterior tentacles, and terrible faces feeding off the entrails of its sacrifices. The Soulworm was a creature of such jealousy that it was transformed and banished to a life of torment at the center of the galaxy where it devoured itself for all time. Legend depicts it as a sensory vampire feeding off negative emotions and the suffering of others. It is said to have birthed the pale squirmers and giant annelids and aschelminths that today populate many planets.

Few come as close to matching this latter description as the prodigious Leviathans of Corbos, the Kdak, and the Silan (and a case may be made for the Exogorths). The Leviathans, once thought to be the bio-engineered constructs of Sith magic created during the Hundred-Year Darkness, were more likely the summoned and re-engineered remnants of a long-vanished progenitor. Jedi archives recovered from Ossus mention beings like these so steeped in the Dark Side they may have been its receptacles. Though rare, they were said to have been formidable hunters of Jedi.

In nature, annelids are shy and retiring and not known for having aggressive tendencies. If these creatures are, in fact, descendents from a terrible avatar of the Dark Side, might this account for the numerous encounters with giant, predatory worms that have been reported by Jedi such as Luke Skywalker? Is it possible that he awakened the dormant nature of these creatures or that perhaps his Force powers drew up the offspring of those ancient enemies of the light from underground?

The Kashi Mer Connection

Of these greater and lesser deities, it is not without significance that direct parallels can be made with a double-trinity of evil gods known as the Niman that were worshipped by the now-extinct Kashi. Prior to the cataclysm that saw their sun go supernova, the Kashi Mystics known as the Guardians of the Breath—who served as priests of the Kashi Mer Dynasty—had received precognitive visions warning them of a terrible vengeance that would be visited upon them if they persisted in abandoning their long-standing worship of the Niman, whom they had condemned as the maleficent root of the galaxy's ills.

So committed to the cleansing of Niman idolaters among them that the Guardians had begun exiling any who would not abandon the old ways. Included among those

was a Guardian named Xendor, who had continued to practice the black rites in secret. He was once believed to be head of the Royale Macheteros, warriors dedicated to protecting the monarchy, and the last of the Kashi Mer to be exiled, but that may have been an ancestor, as other stories list Xendor as a Jedi teacher. Whatever the case, he would go on to raise an army of Darksiders known as the Legions of Lettow to destroy the Jedi in the terrible war of the First Great Schism.

Unlike Xendor, the great majority of the Kashi Mer would not return to the dark sacrifices and carnal practices that characterized worship under the double-trinity, taking hope instead from the ancient prophecy of a galaxy restored. As they had come to love their world, they refused to abandon it in the face of fear. In truth, they did not know in which generation the calamity would come or in what form, just that it would. But it is said that even if they had known, they would not have left. The end of their world came as foretold, but it is their courage that became their epitaph, for songs are still sung today—over 25,000 years later—of the Kashi Mer and their courageous march against the coming doom.

The Lady with the Locust Heart

There is an older, forgotten deity also referenced by the cult of Five called the "Lady with the Locust Heart," though who she might correlate to, if anyone, remains uncertain. If my mission proves successful, I hope to be able to better identify her, and with support from various obscure sources, determine if veneration of this feminine divinity can be traced back to the aphotic rings of historic record. Is she inspired by or related to the Trandoshan Scorekeeper, the Godoan Dancing Goddess, and the galactically ubiquitous Goddess (sometimes but not always designated as Onrai, Via, or Vahl)? Although there are hints that point to an additional identification with the Mighty Mother of the Thousand Young, it is too early to speculate.

The Shunned Deity

There is a divinity listed among several species that corresponds to the amorphous-shaped fourth deity that is shunned by cultists. Since this being goes by different names, it is not always an obvious identification, though certain personality attributes and duties are common in all of them. Amongst the avian races, for example, the Mrissi pay homage to Har-meneb-ti, Lord of the Sky; the Tarong revere Ora, Lord of Light; the Tikiarri's great messianic figure is Armihet, Avatar of the Sun; the rarely seen Qom Qae and the Qom Jha attribute their gifts of flight and breath to Rahoris, Hunter of the Dawn; while the S'kytri have various legends of the Great Hormaket, Prince of the Sky, who battles against the Lords of Darkness. It's worthy of note that when Kharys, the Sith-trained Majestrix of Skye, came to power, she forbade the reading of the ancient legends, particularly the annual reciting of the Epic of Hormaket.

The Father of Shadows

The least known deity referenced by the cult of Five is one called the "Father of Shadows." To my knowledge, this entity does not correspond to any of the greater or lesser-known gods. From what little I have gathered, he is the most ancient of all the evil gods, for whom there appear to be five or six additional entities that work alongside or under him. Maybe more. He is possibly their progenitor in some way, shape, or form, but as of yet, I cannot find sufficient evidence to prove as much.

The cult of Five had claimed to have left the "normal dimension" for another, and it is possible that they had acquired a tremendous store of ancient knowledge from this other dimension. Who or whatever this "Father of Shadows" is, I am grateful his cult is not widespread in our galaxy.

DATAPAD FOUND IN A DESERTED SHIP

Recently, the Bureau of Scouting and Exploration Services sent me a copy of a recording that I now transcribe here, a recording that has circulated among the Scout Services for over fifty years. As a matter of course, I must warn the reader that it is not for the faint of heart.

This transmission was purportedly intercepted by a starship pilot identifying himself as Rohb Lakh. It should be noted that while scientists have dismissed it entirely, claiming it was either a forgery, a joke, or the ravings of a madman, Lieutenant Jayme Makkadin (formerly of the New Republic Scout Service and Imperial Survey Corps) disagrees with that assessment, as do I. The pilot's encounter bears a striking resemblance to that horrific event described by the Solos.

For now, the original has been forwarded to the Antiquities Museum of R'khemas and continues to be studied.

Lieutenant Jayme Makkadin
Nova Scouts
Bureau of Scouting and Exploration Services

Lieutenant Makkadin,

As per our recent communication, I am sending you the disputed datapad entry recovered from derelict ship #JL100-719-97. This is the document found in the deserted vessel discovered adrift in the Degan Gas Cloud of the Elrood Sector in the Metharian Nebula Territories. If this is not a hoax, then the author had clearly lost all touch with reality near the end, the poor man. All that awful screaming is difficult to sit through. Of course, it is not unheard of for pilots lost in the vastness of space to suffer derangement. It must be a terrible thing when the mind turns against itself. Despite its content and rather disturbing nature, perhaps you'll find something worth following up on.

Vin Boej'f

New Republic Scout Service
Department of Information

Catalog #099.9.1624-0
File #702108

These are likely my last remaining moments alive, and my final chance to get something right. My name is Captain Rohb Lakh, and at this moment my scanners are picking up a nebulous object approaching. I see nothing out the viewport. But it's coming, and time is running out.

It might be said that I've been on a troubled path since the time I was young enough to fly my own ship. The lure of new worlds, hidden riches, high-stakes adventure, and all the accolades and admiration that come with that were all I cared about. Dissolute, profligate, and irredeemable they called me, and all that from those who liked me!

Several weeks ago, I began the expedition that would culminate in my final journey, a necessarily solo one to the distant and largely unexplored Elrood system, on the hunt for a legend. What I discovered was horror and the realization that comes at the finale of a life spent in vain and empty pursuits. Just maybe you'll learn what I didn't. Probably not, but at least I can say I tried.

Know this, fellow adventurers: there is nothing to be found in the antique maps of grizzled pirates and star charts of weary smugglers; no joy in the trophy heads staring back at you from long-vanquished beasts; no reward for the endless hours of loneliness cruising the void between the stars.

I entered the Degan Gas Clouds, long rumored to be the hiding place of lost treasure and space dragons. These were what I'd come to seek and why I had to come alone. It was illegal to hunt Duinuogwuin, not that I cared, but spending years chopping up bricks on an icy prison world was not my idea of a good time.

Star Dragons are considered the ultimate prize—something no one has ever killed or caught (not that a few haven't claimed to). I wasn't the first to go after them, and I wouldn't be the last. It didn't matter to me that they were sapient creatures. If I'd wanted to, I could've come up with a long list of justifications to shut up the self-righteous, alien-hugging types and soothe my conscience at the same time. You'll probably say I didn't have much of a conscience, but hey, I never hurt Humans, not even that harpy of an ex-wife after she stole everything I owned.

So it was that my obsession would end here. One final mistake in a life of mistakes. Once I was within the midst of the roiling, gaseous environs, my instruments began to sputter and fail. Before long, I spotted a large drifting asteroid, and at that instant my scanners came back to life and revealed that something alive existed there...

The ship was suddenly struck, by what I couldn't tell. Another, much stronger jolt knocked me unconscious. Later, I dreamt. And in my dreams, I saw things, disquieting faces floating in a grey aether with black holes in the place of stars; there were ships with odd angles; colossal cities rising up in basalt and stone; and worse, loathsome, pale, undulating shapes squirming and writhing atop mounds of flesh and bone....

I awoke in an unknown place, a keep within the asteroid, I later learned. Its interiors were lavish but antiquated, dating back centuries, perhaps longer. I had little time to explore, for I was soon met by my hosts: three women who identified themselves as the

Sisters. The eldest was thin and matronly, her dark hair pulled back tight. No name was offered, and since the way she looked at me made me think of a maze-fly caught in an Eberon web, I dared not ask. The other two called themselves Jirell and Cairon and were no easier to gaze upon, and something in their bearing irritated me. Like crooked and twisted trees they were, gnarled past any semblance of beauty they'd once possessed.

I asked of my present circumstances and received only vague responses and suggestive smiles. After a few pleasantries, I was offered a tour of the extravagant manse, though certain rooms were passed by without explanation, and I decided that I'd examine them at a later date on my own. The ostentation of the manor did not fail to leave an impression, nor did the valuable works of art and sculptures that adorned it. As you can guess, I wasn't above stealing, but throughout the walkabout of various stately rooms, I couldn't shake the feeling that someone else was there, out of sight, watching. I asked if they lived by themselves, and the matron said yes, but the others just looked at each other and laughed.

During the rather unpleasant meal that followed, I learned that the three were part of an insular religious sect dedicated to serving several obscure ancient gods. Jirell explained that their deities had been deceived by a fallen demon who murdered them or banished them to a shadow realm where they were held back from their destiny as the rightful rulers of the galaxy. But when the stars were right and sufficient sacrifices made, the gods would return to reclaim the universe they first shaped. And when that happened, the Sisters would rule as queens upon worlds of their choosing.

I didn't need or ask for further explanation, as it was obvious these women were not in their right minds, and a fervent desire to get out of there overcame me. I thanked them and expressed my regrets that I could stay no longer, as pressing demands lay ahead, but Jirell and Cairon only laughed and insisted I spend the evening. The matron added plainly that my hunt for Duinuogwuin was in vain anyway, as such creatures did not reside here, though one or two were known to have gotten lost passing through. I didn't recall having informed any of them of my pursuit, but the crone smiled viciously, adding that she would love to catch one herself.

Cairon and Jirell rose to show me my quarters, after which they intoned that if I should seek solace, I might visit them in their rooms later that evening. I thanked them and closed the door behind me, checking for a lock or bolt and cursing the fact that there was none. No matter. I wasn't staying. By cover of darkness, I'd grab a few things they wouldn't notice and get back to my ship.

I allowed a few hours to pass, and after I felt assured they were asleep, I escaped the confines of my room for the prizes hiding behind the sealed doors I'd passed earlier in the day. I always carried a small torch with me, which I made use of now, but met with nothing through the long corridors save my own trepidation. At last, I came upon a particularly ornate carven door that depicted unusual and decadent designs expertly rendered. Seizing the opportunity, I entered the room and shut the door behind me.

The room was circular and disappointingly small, with another on the far side. Only one adornment decorated the room, a pedestal in its center. Chained to it was a tome of clearly ancient manufacture. It was no wonder they kept it from the peering eyes of strangers. I shone my torch on the book, trying to ascertain its value. The book was open and scribed in an alien tongue, but the illustrations! I am no priest, but the pictures that adorned the pages, I cannot describe—they could only be derived from the most vile and

repugnant of minds—grotesque visions of misshapen monsters flaying and satiating themselves on still-living beings. Complex and complicated formulae accompanied these, evidently for magical purposes, several of which I could see were meant to summon hideous things from wherever such things lived.

I moved away from the book to search for less provocative baubles when I remembered the other door. It too was unlocked, and I walked through... and there I found a scene of madness. The husks of several mummified beings of various races were arrayed along the walls before me. There was the cadaver of a once-beautiful Zeltron, another of a Mandallian Giant, and still others, all perfectly preserved; the body of a strange, small, monkey-like creature with a skull instead of a face stood in one corner, while a rare Spiner had been propped up in another. The looks of terror on their faces is something I will never be able to erase from my mind, for it was clear these poor souls had been murdered in the throes of extreme fear.

I turned to depart, and there the Sisters stood gazing upon me. Startled, I attempted a lame excuse for my presence, but the crone lifted up an amulet she wore, out of which an inky ray was emitted, enveloping me. With that, everything turned to black.

An unknown period of time later, I woke up in bed on my own ship, which was again operational and drifting far from the terrible asteroid and noxious gas clouds of Elrood. I figured I must have dreamt the whole encounter and was grateful for that. My wife lay beside me, smiling warmly and caressing my hair. It seemed natural and right that she should be there, and so I didn't think to question it. We spoke of past times, friends, and places long forgotten.

Hours seemed to pass in this manner, and I closed my eyes to feel her lips, only to press upon the face of the grinning, mouldering corpse of my wife!

I instantly awoke from the illusion and realized I was still aboard the keep of the Sisters. The harridan lay in the place where my wife had just been, and the younger two were cackling again with that damned, deranged laugh! I knew then that I'd been fooled by a hallucinatory trick perpetrated by these mad, awful creatures that could not be called women.

It was but the first of many such awful phantasms to come. I was told I would not survive—that none ever did—and I didn't doubt it; I was never questioned, nor informed of the reasons behind the horrific things they did to me.

I hear it outside the ship now. It's close.

The Sisters are long gone. They had been alive for centuries—or so they claimed—secluded in their immoral den of horror, luring unsuspecting and unwary travelers. But in that time, they'd grown arrogant and careless. In one of my fits of hallucinatory delusion, I pulled out a small vibro-shiv I keep concealed on my person at all times. I stabbed at the grotesque neck and face of what I thought was my wife's cackling corpse glaring down at me. Again and again, I stabbed and cut, yet it was the evil hag whose body fell carved up and raw upon me. And in my rage, consumed by a madness I'd never before known, I leapt upon the other two as they entered the room. I felt and still feel no remorse for this act, for they were truly evil, and I'm thankful they're dead and gone. But in my nightmares, they appear to me and are laughing.

My one mistake was going back for the book. It is surely a thing of evil, but at the time, I thought only that I deserved some kind of payment for the ordeal I'd endured,

and I estimated the book's value to be in the hundreds of thousands. It was stupid. I should have just run, especially when I discovered that I could now read the words when I turned the pages; in fact, I felt *compelled* to read them!

In it was a tale of the ancient gods who usurped the indolent Celestials and gave the first races power and weapons. In exchange, the gods demanded their help to rid the galaxy of the Celestials, for which they would be made kings. The races battled one another, and the gods were pleased. But they were betrayed by a demon who cast them into the Outer Places. Soon, they would return.

Without wanting to, I recited the blasphemous incantations for summoning the avatar of the hungry ones, the pestilence that walks in gloom, the Soulworm. Blood was required... and more, the ebullition of pain.

And there was *my* picture in the book, *my* face screaming in terror! The creatures, the hideous grinning horrors, were feeding upon *me!*

Scanners indicate that nebulous forms are approaching the ship. A thing moved past the viewport, a winged creature with a wide-mouthed face of sharp teeth...

Oh no! They're inside now! They've come for me, the emissaries of El'Shuddem!

A carrion stench permeates even the hidden recesses of this hold. I hear shuffling in the corridors outside.

Gah! It calls to me from beyond! I can see it in my waking eyes now as in the nightmare vision, beckoning me to come forth and fulfill my role.

There is no escape. It knows where I hide. It calls, and I must obey! Immense, twisting coils pulsating in deepest space. The Void-Horror has awoken! There is laughter in the dark portal! The Soulworm must feed!

It comes scratching at the door. I beg you, all who listen to this... Keep away! Beware the dark places of the galaxy... It has found me, and I must answer its call! It's coming through...

The door is bursting o—

[Transmission ends]

These small fragments of evidence, such as the recording just presented, begin to form a tapestry that allows me to peel back the curtains of the mist-shrouded past. I have yet only begun to unearth the aggregation of fathomless intervals and piece together its resounding rubric cipher, but I feel as though I have already cracked the vault and peered within its murky depths.

The time is not yet right to unfurl so prodigious and onerous an account, for I have one final journey to make, and there is much yet to sift through.

EXCERPT FROM THE HOLOCRON OF LORD SHADOWSPAWN

Surrounded by sentient stars and an exoplasmic moat of malevolence, the True Sith preserve the secret of our survival from any unlucky enough to penetrate the occluded depths of the Unknown Regions, though few dare wander farther than the Terminus system or the wailing kingdoms of Nihl Rahaphtor beyond Crakull, and none brave the territory of Mnggal-Mnggal past Zakuul, a pestilential realm of disease and madness patrolled by the oozing, rotting corpses of the Vagaari.

And behind the Red Nebula, beneath the all-seeing eyes of occult god-kings and mummified mages, armies numerous as the stars train for war or toil in torment to nourish the ravenous esurience of the Ancient Ones…

[This portion corrupted beyond repair]

The myth suggests a heretofore unknown aspect of the seals in which certain mortal families were chosen as Guardians over the Doors, presenting an additional layer of protection. Seeing as the breaking of the Mortis seal was indirectly caused by Palpatine himself, it is likely no coincidence that House Palpatine—which Darth Sidious himself slaughtered—is considered one of the Seven Impassable Doors holding back Chaos in Naboo myth. But as even a youngling knows: Chaos cannot be held back for long…

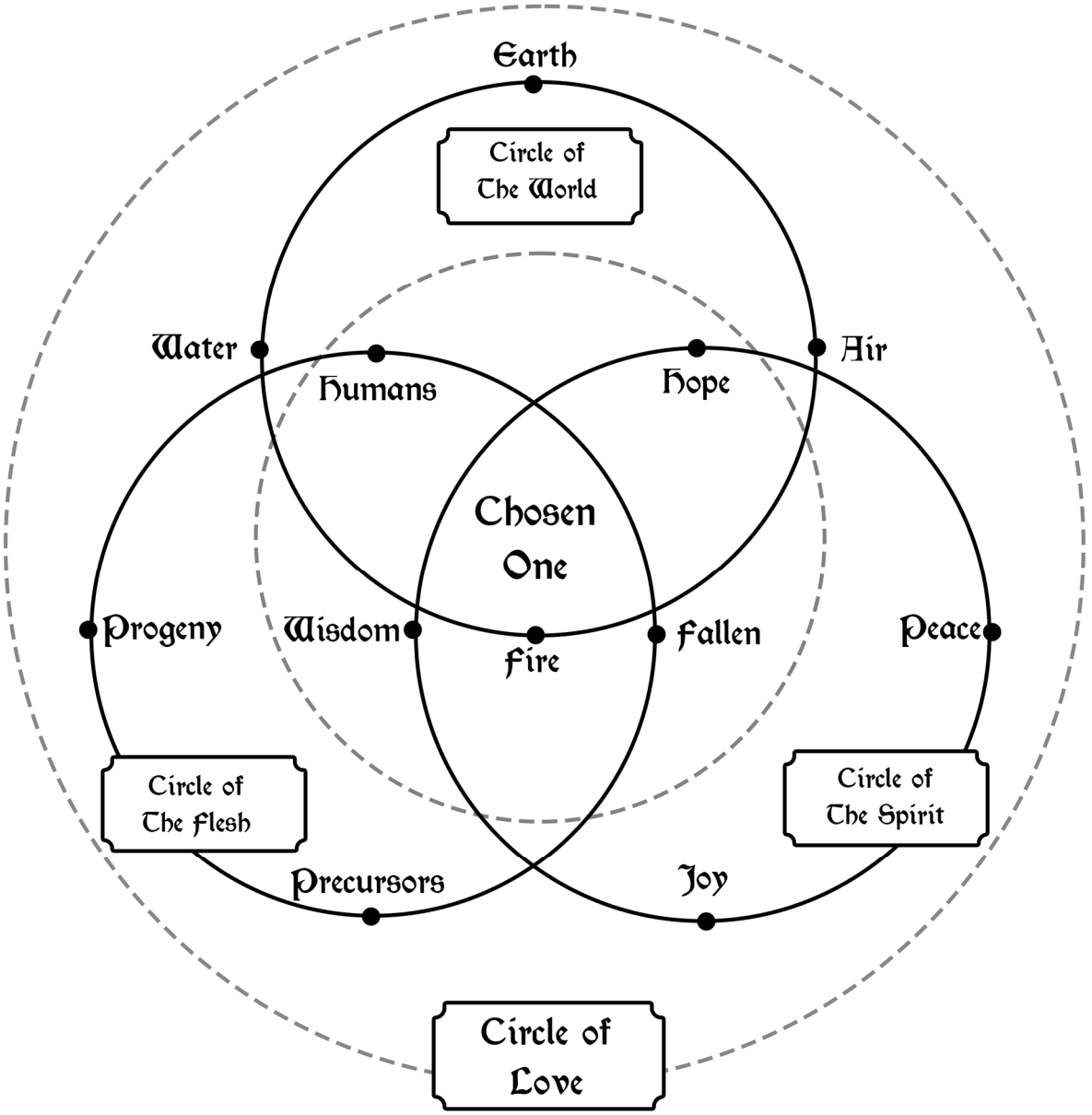
In their pilgrimage to the planet Rhand, our servants aspire to become acolytes and potent sorcerers. The height of power in our eldritch domain is a thing of horror to most, for such is the ancient Way of the Dark long forgotten by our brethren in the Caldera. Our greatest practitioners morph into heteromorphic things of living putrefaction, for in that uncanny, innermost coven in the Temple of Darkness gather no gilded kings or splendid queens but obscene Princes of Darkness unclad in the raiment of the world; grinning wraiths and roiling aberrations whispering to the writhing shadows; sibyls and liches little more than wriggling ribbons of rugose flesh in a multiplicity of surrealistic forms and fantastic garb.

And shuffling alongside them are incomprehensible monsters of squalid, flickering shapes… For upon Rhand had been erected in the most ancient times a Forbidden Portal to those Hells of absolute damnation and indescribable repulsion known as the Charnel Worlds, and from there creep things that would stop the stoutest hearts, whose very visages would shatter the sanity of untutored minds.

Unlike our brethren in Known Space, the True Sith are not blind to the nihilism of the Dark Path. Yet knowing the doom at hand, we do not eschew it as madness or folly, but rather embrace it as the inevitable destiny of the universe that we must hasten to its end. So do we of the True Sith use the narcissism of the Stygian Sith to our ends in war after war, hastening events to the flagellation of the galaxy and its remaking into glorious Shadow Worlds!

Soon, all the seals that hold these back will shatter, and so shall our gathering forces go forth, serpents, satraps, and shadows not seen since the earliest battles of the Cosmic Wars.

The Twelve Great Realms



THE INFINITY REALM OF APEIRON

Written by Dr. Royce Crater
Dedicated to Arhul Hextrophon
With special thanks to Drs. Aryn Hort Thom, Obern Wentham, Rygel Lawlins, Kelmar Aryn, Wes Adod, and Wolery Urhart

INTRODUCTION

It has been one year since *Supernatural Encounters* was published with the official imprimatur of the Historical Council. To say that a lot has happened since then would be an understatement. Despite the shocking revelations of that day, there are still those who believe that the work should have been consigned to the Spurious Directories and continue to make their objections vocally known. I am gratified to report that, despite their best efforts, interest in the works of the late, great Professor remains undiminished within the halls of academia or the general public more broadly, even opening up new or expanding upon existing fields of scholarly inquiry. The founding of the Hextrophon Memorial Centre for Pre-Republic Studies on Chandrila, a sister institute to the Arhul Hextrophon School of Embedded Journalism on Lerct, has further consolidated bright minds from a range of disciplinary backgrounds to expound upon the late Professor's seminal work.

Amusingly, one such discipline to see an influx of funding and public notice is Otherspatial physics, long a credible but overlooked fringe science. With the Galactic Alliance recently forced to declassify (still heavily redacted) reports regarding the incidents at Stronghold, Kayri III, and Sanctuary Minorin response to freedom of information requests, interest in corroborating Professor Hextrophon's claims regarding Illathurion has never been higher.[243]

While I gladly leave physics – and all the associated migraines – to the physicists, I humbly contend that history has its own contributions to make in these discussions, examining scientific phenomena from a different and complementary angle. To that end, I have set about seeking historical evidence to contextualise a similarly well-documented phenomenon that nevertheless sits at the periphery of reputable scientific discussion: time travel and its possible connection to Splendid Ap and his dimension of Apeiron, known alternatively as the Infinity Realm, the Fourth Dimension, the Universe of Non-Causality, the Timestream, or Otherwhen.[244]

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[243] I am reliably informed that, despite the influx of funding into a previously grant-starved discipline, Otherspatial physics remains the preferred vernacular and the new colloquialism, "Illathurion studies," has been met with considerable consternation. The hard and social sciences have seldom seen eye-to-eye, so the irony of their once-reputable field attracting more funding and public attention than ever due to its association with the unverified works of a historian remains a sore subject.

[244] Splendid Ap is likewise known by many names across cultures, including Ap'aci, Ibon'aci, and Aforgomon.

Despite commonly being derided as the subject of low-budget schlock churned out during creative dry spells on Adarlon, the relativity of time and the capacity to move through it has been documented in too many instances for the notion to be dismissed out of hand. The pernicious influence of black holes in distorting space-time is common enough even for the layman to have heard stories, such as those of Kinnin Vo-Shay, Sam Heggs, and Bosbit Matacher, whom the HoloNet tabloids once touted as the Oldest Human in the Galaxy.[245] Surviving records of the ancient Jedi and Sith similarly claim that the greatest masters of both orders were able to travel through time, whether through the obscure flow-walking technique devised by the Aing-Tii, the use of Force-imbued artifacts and relics, or via physical locations that serve as a space-time nexus, such as the mythical lost Temple of Kordoku. Another trove of recently declassified documents sheds further light on the *Trait Luminique* Incident in which a group of Rebel operatives, stealing an experiment Flight Unlimited Group prototype from Lankor VI, found themselves transported back through time to the Great Sith War era. Though also heavily redacted, the declassified portions of their report not only provide further corroborating evidence for the credibility of time travel as a phenomenon, but also confirm the existence and actions of Darth Dreadwar during this period.

Given the existence of so many specific, demonstrably provable case studies, it is a reasonable supposition that the myths, legends, and written oral histories of countless species also addressing the subject merit a far more serious re-examination by historians. However, I would go so far as contending that these do not represent instances of time travel as commonly understood, but rather a form of *interdimensional travel*, where individuals or vessels somehow find a means of penetrating Apeiron through which they gain access back to Skyriver at various and different points in space-time. No doubt, there are those who will say I have gone mad like poor Hex before me, but the supposition is not as outlandish as it might seem. Between the foundation established within *Supernatural Encounters* itself, the generous bequeathal of several unpublished papers and notes by the late Professor, and a similarly magnanimous grant from a recent benefactor, I have found considerable historical evidence detailing both the existence of Apeiron and its connection to unexplained temporal phenomena throughout the galaxy.

I began my pursuit of answers with the Cephalons, a curious race capable of fourth-dimensional perception, with a small colony of theirs known to exist on Coruscant. Alas, even with the aid of their translational computers, I found their responses to my queries as cryptic and incomprehensible as everyone else who has ever tried to communicate with them to any degree of depth. However, our linguistic difficulties notwithstanding, the Cephalons became physically animated when I showed them pictographs of a triangular motif common across several disconnected species widely interpreted as conveying the concept of time.[246]

[245] While there are no doubt plenty of tall tales made up by spacers in the mix, the venerable droid duo, C-3PO and R2-D2, have similarly claimed to have travelled to a different time period in this way, though when exactly they visited the Forest Moon of Endor prior to the climactic battle there is a subject of debate.

[246] I had initially assumed that this motif was a simplified depiction of Splendid Ap. However, from what little I was able to glean from the Cephalons, it may also be representative of three separate dimensions united by a shared cosmological link. This may be a reference to our Skyriver, Apeiron,

Emboldened by this discovery, I decided to follow the origin of the holos I shared to their respective sources, embarking on expeditions to the worlds of Jerne, Almas, Benja-Rihn, Crusis, and Altrus.

The remnants of the Jerne Imperium, already sand-blasted ruins before the Empire devastated them even further in an attempted ambush of Princess Leia, offered only fragmentary hints. Yet upon a fallen obelisk, amidst symbols denoting "eternity" and "time," there was that triangular motif surrounded by insets that once housed crystals before being pillaged by looters. In the Cularin system, astrophysicists attempt to make sense of evidence that its celestial bodies were forced into a new alignment after a sudden shift in its fifth orbital position. And there, upon the surface of Almas, I found that same motif upon the remains of a Sith fortress, with my churlish Tarasin guide begrudgingly translating references to a being called "Ibon'aci." Both Benja-Rihn and Crusis share the legend of Tet-Ami, the Guardian of Time, though both differ in their accounts of this shared mythology. Even amidst the whirling maelstrom of the Deep Core, where archaeologists under Dr. Henrietya Antilles seek to unlock the secrets of the lost Altrusian civilisation, I could not escape that ubiquitous triangular sigil, this time set above a mural rich with symbology found on other worlds like Lothal that possess a shared legend of a World Between Worlds.

However, for all the evidence I was able to uncover on my travels, the greatest source of information came from the libraries of the New Jedi Order. Shortly after its founding, the Order was bequeathed the *Pavan Case Files*, the collected notes and records of a Jedi Knight and Order 66 survivor who was able to make a career as a private investigator. For the sake of posterity, the Order allowed most of the *Pavan Case Files* to be published and made widely available to the public, but, unbeknownst to all but a few, several documents were withheld due to concern regarding the subject matter. Of particular note, Pavan once came into the possession of the Holocron of Darth Ramage, a mysterious Sith Lord of the Baneite line. Though the holocron itself has since been lost, Pavan transcribed a number of entries contained within, detailing the Sith Lord's attempts to penetrate Apeiron, a realm which he directly mentions by name. As there was no context for the term at the time, the records were sealed and then forgotten, until the publication of *Supernatural Encounters* triggered the memory of Jedi Archivist Tionne Solusar. Upon hearing of my own inquiries into the subject, Master Solusar was gracious enough to provide copies of the relevant transcripts, which I submit into the public record for the first time.

THE PAVAN CASE FILES

Even by the standards of the Baneite Sith, precious little is known about Darth Ramage and records about him seem to have been lost or deliberately destroyed after his death.[247] His

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and what *Supernatural Encounters* dubbed Hyperion, though I must concede that this could be a translational or linguistic error.

[247] It is possible that Ramage was deemed a heretical figure and expunged from even Sith records by his apprentice, in much the same manner as the equally enigmatic Darth Gravid. This remains purely

own holocron remains one of the sole primary sources to offer proof that he even existed, with the device recovered from Dentaria during an expedition spearheaded by the Trade Federation. The fleet of ring-shaped, havod-hulled *Mamnohulk*-class freighters was personally overseen by Deputy Viceroy Hath Monchar, an unusual move in and of itself made all the more bizarre by him abandoning his post and being assassinated shortly afterwards. It appears that Monchar attempted to sell the holocron in the Coruscant underworld, at which point it vanishes from records, before somehow reappearing as part of the infamous Catalogue Nineteen in the Imperial Archives. Given that Darth Sidious was already active on Coruscant and involved in manipulating the Trade Federation at the time of Monchar's disappearance, it seems likely that the device had been in his possession that entire time – an alarming prospect given some of the information it is purported to have contained.

The theft of the device by Haninum Tyk Rhinann, then the personal aide to Darth Vader himself, sparked a series of events that allowed the holocron to fall into the hands of Jax Pavan, who accessed it and produced a series of transcriptions. Data corruption caused by damage to the device, combined with its eventual destruction, leaves an incomplete record of the life of Darth Ramage or any means of independently verifying the transcripts, but what little information was recovered has been revelatory. Of particular note is that Darth Ramage appears to have been the *nom de guerre* of renowned Givin mathematician, physicist, and cosmologist, Axkm Garmet.

As a tenured professor at the acclaimed R'khemas Institute of Technology and president of the Future of Sapience Institute, Garmet pushed the boundaries of theoretical and applied physics while cultivating a reputation as a public intellectual. His groundbreaking research into black holes and their theoretical white hole equivalents earned Professor Garmet the prestigious Bao-Dur Science Prize, while his gregarious personality, considerable wit, and public advocacy for rationalism and futurism saw him listed as Chronos' Sentient of the Sidereal.[248]

Naturally, Professor Garmet was able to cultivate significant contacts in government, industry, and academia, securing untold millions in both public and private sector grants during the course of his career. His genius ensured that these funds could credibly be claimed to have sponsored significant advances in scientific knowledge, the creation of hundreds of patents, and other reputable endeavours. However, it appears that privately, Garmet was funnelling a small fortune to support the Grand Plan to restore Sith rule over the galaxy and to fund his own secret research into a field that cut against his reputation as a serious scientific scholar: time travel. The information contained within Darth Ramage's holocron makes it clear that he considered temporal phenomena to have a rational explanation based upon

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conjectural, as Pavan's excerpts only suggest Ramage thought little of his apprentice but offer no insights as to his demise.

[248] The existence of white holes has never been definitively proven, though fragmentary records from the pre-Republic Council of Corporations indicate that they succeeded in artificially creating some only for their inherent instability to cause them to collapse into a hyperspace sinkhole. Declassified records from the Imperial Department of Military Research indicate that Dr. Umak Leth took the concept seriously enough to attempt to recreate these so-called white hole bombs, though he had zero success in this endeavour.

accessing another dimension – Apeiron – and that this realm could be used to facilitate changes to the timeline beneficial to the Sith.

The fact that a physicist as renowned as Garmet took such a notion credibly is significant, though his hidden background as a Sith Lord casts this in a more concerning light. Thankfully, it appears from his writings that his apprentice did not share his views. Garmet himself is believed to have perished when his Coruscant laboratory collapsed in on itself during a sudden implosion, the cause of which has never been determined. While this generated significant media attention and conspiracy theories at the time, the lack of any verifiable facts led both to fizzle out in relatively short order. The excerpts presented herein shed led on this unsolved mystery and indicate that Tegmark met his end as a result of his experiments into Apeiron – if, indeed, he truly perished at all.

At this point, it should be noted that the remaining text in this piece is quoted directly from the primary source and none of the words from this point on are my own. The sole exceptions are the "Hexnotes," as I continue to call them, maintaining that tradition in loving memory of the late Professor. I am cognizant of the fact that this leaves much of the piece reliant upon the testimony of a self-confessed Dark Lord of the Sith – hardly the most reliable or trustworthy sources to serve as the foundation of one's argument. Nevertheless, Darth Ramage disappeared centuries before Arhul Hextrophon was even born, let alone came to author *Supernatural Encounters*. Given the overlap of their specific claims – which I have left unaltered – in spite of the centuries separating the two, I would humbly argue that the testimony merits attention irrespective of its provenance.

EXCERPTS FROM THE HOLOCRON OF DARTH RAMAGE

[The following text was transcribed from the Holocron of Darth Ramage by Jedi Knight Jax Pavan, with a written hardcopy included amongst the *Pavan Case Files.* As the primary source has been lost, there is no way of confirming whether the transcript is accurate.]

A common misconception holds that the Sith of old were a superstitious lot, whose society was enthralled by the worship of heathen deities. At a shallow, surface level, this assertion appears axiomatic: the original Sith Empire was influenced by a priest caste who performed rituals and offered sacrifices in the name of Immortal Gods. Yet one only needs to dig a little deeper to see a far more enlightened and rational civilisation. It is the way of the Sith to disguise our true nature, to veil ourselves in layers of deception, to withhold our knowledge from all but those who are most worthy to wield it. Religious societies seldom achieve much in the way of technological advancement, and yet the Sith were able to establish one of the largest regional empires of their age – a feat that Jedi historians and their Republic puppets have long sought to reduce and diminish, ignoring the obvious presence of the Sith Empire on worlds as far-flung as Arkania, Doan, and Naos.

One need only look at the pantheon of greater and lesser so-called deities that the Sith supposedly venerated to see that they are merely allegories: the Magna Mater and the Soul-worm, two sides of the same credit, one representing biological creation and the other the

Sith's dominion over nature through the science of alchemy; Co Pana Cine, a literal anti-god who embodies the entropy in the universe; and Ibon'aci, who was overtly "worshipped" as the master of space, time, and technology – dominions that the Sith otherwise claimed for themselves. Between these and countless other examples, it is abundantly clear that the Sith pantheon ranks among the greater deceptions ever perpetrated by our kind: smoke and mirrors invented to keep their more primitive subjects obedient and deceive their enemies into underestimating what was truly a rational, scientifically advanced civilisation.

Such obfuscations were no doubt intended to ensure that, when their empire fell as all inevitably do, only the worthy would be able to pierce the layers of symbolism and allegory to grasp the hidden truths. I intend to focus my research on Ibon'aci, described in many texts as "too mysterious to worship." As true Sith do not worship anything save reason, the implied invitation to probe deeper is clear.

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The ancient texts make reference to Temporal Gates, devices that – once you set aside any notions of superstition – serve to create an interdimensional portal leading from our realm to Apeiron. These Gates have been described in such variegated forms as silver keys, jewelled Signs, time crystals, quantum mirrors, red forest leaves, omphaloi, cornerstones, and various and sundry timepieces. However, more enlightened societies have made reference to temporal drives that can be fitted into vehicles running the technological gamut from bathyspheres and diving bells to groundcars and speeders to starfighters and capital ships.[249] The fact that the latter exist is indicative of the former being likewise rational in nature, representing some advanced form of technology capable of being miniaturised and disguised from prying eyes

Surviving records of the ancient Sith speak of a realm known as Illathurion, from which they derived much knowledge, forbidden techniques, and power. I have long theorised that this is a similar allegory, where power was meant in the literal sense: a parallel dimension from which the Sith devised a means of extracting energy to fuel their rapid civilisational expansion. Could Apeiron be another such dimension, connected to the fundaments of space-time? The existence of such a place could serve to address the issue of various theorised paradoxes considered inherent in temporal manipulation.

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[249] Even when understood in technologically rationalist terms, many civilisations that discovered time travel lacked a sophisticated grasp of the phenomenon they were dealing with, resulting in contemporary historical accounts being littered with vague, pseudo-scientific terms such as "vibratory planes" and "super-atomics."

[The beginning of this recording was corrupted due to prior damage.] *kkkt*-halon have proven helpful, but much of what they say is incomprehensible. Less use-*tzzzt* Zathrii of Eridain, whose babbling nonsense I put to end with my lights*kkkkt* However, the greatest revelation has come from the holocron of *zzzzt*-war the Magnificent, which I was able to recover from a cult of his followers remaining on Dentaria. The gatekeeper of th-*krrrkt*-ear-old Sith Lord confirmed that the Immortal Go-*tzzzzzt*-thing but mere allegories and complimented me on my wisdom in seeing through the charade.

Darth Drea-*kttttt*-roven most helpful in validating my theories and acting as a sounding board. The gatekeeper seems convinced that my research could be used to facilitate the resurrection of its creator. True Sith do not share power but I have inveigled the holocron by acting as a worthy prospective apprentice rather than the Master of my age and soon every other. Per its advice, I have procured at great expe-*tzzzzt*-ara spice for use in consciousness expansion. Such an ingredient is among the rarest strains in the galaxy, but the Sith have long cultivated contacts with the criminal underworld. By mixing the drug with bot-*kkkkt*-sist the side-effects of supertemporal insanity brought about by its use. I shall elaborate on the process of mixing *zzzzzt* my next recor-[The recording Dath Ramage alludes to appears to be missing from the surviving holocron database].

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Apotheosis! The hour of my ascension is at hand! Constructing a Gate combi-*kkkt*-tromagnetic properties of pyr-*tkkkt*-he quantum elements of Lign-*zzzzzt*-rnessed the brainwaves of my Cephalon research subjects. The Gate has opened! Soon, I shall cross the threshold into Ap-*thhhht*-tend my dominion as master of space and time!

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I have plumbed the depths of time itself, but, without the biological capacity for fourth-dimensional perception, I have been forced to return after this successful expedition. I did not waste this opportunity: the Cephalons are enslaved to my will, obedient thralls awaiting my imminent return, and I have devised a ritual to grant me the traits necessary to perceive Apeiron to the fullest degree. Yet I am… confused. I tasked the Cephalons to create a map of their realm for me, but… why did I do that? One cannot accurately represent four dimensions upon a two-dimensional medium! This map is nonsensical, not at all representative of what I witnessed! Perhaps it will yield its secrets after I complete the ritual… Yes…

Bah! My apprentice wishes to meet with me. He has become quite… insistent. The fool believes that he alone has been left to further the goals of the Grand Plan while I focus on "fantastical and indulgent experiments." Little does he realise that the breakthroughs I have made have done more to usher in the ascendancy of the Sith than any Dark Lord before me. I can sense the dark side stirring. Soon I will complete the prophecy of the Sith'ari and reign

eternal across not just this dimension but all others as well. The Cephalons told me of the worlds of Apeiron and provided me with a map of the Infinity Realm. These notes are too important to take any chances with until I am ready to return once more. I will send this holocron to Dentaria. It will be kept safe there…

A CLOSER LOOK: THE WORLDS OF APEIRON

[Continued from the Holocron of Darth Ramage]

The Infinity Realm of Apeiron is, fittingly and paradoxically, a place of ordered chaos: a parallel dimension in which history unfolds without regard for the complex interplay between past, present, and future. Created by Ibon'aci through the power of the Cornerstone[250], an unaccounted-for fragment of the Foundation Stone said to have aided in the birth of Skyriver, Apeiron has become a cosmic playground for rogue or inattentive Celestials, the malefic Timeless Ones, and other baleful forces. Due to the circumstances of its creation, Apeiron in some ways mirrors the Skyriver galaxy yet is untethered from the bounds of its singular history. Changes to a single event from that original realm inevitably create ripples that are consigned to play out in Apeiron instead, where entire worlds pop in and out of existence in the blink of an eye or have to be consigned within their own pocket dimensions brought into being by the time worms – for the Infinity Realm is as much a place *between places* as it is a place itself. Though once the province of Ibon'aci, an ancient god of space, time, and mathematics, Apeiron has become home to various Fāta, emigrees from Frivoli, and fourth-dimensional species who ensure the proper functioning of the Infinity Realm.[251]

The core region of Apeiron contains a number of permanent and enduring worlds that were created by these beings to serve their strange and incomprehensible purposes. These systems are in turn ringed by clusters of thousands of stable white holes, which serve as gateways to pocket dimensions brought about by various and sundry means. Such clusters comprise distinct astrographical regions delineated by their purpose and origin. The lostworlds of the **Amisaevum Cluster** are brought about when actions taken in the Skyriver or Hyperion dimensions result in contradictions or paradoxes that must be resolved in Apeiron, often caused by the misuse of Temporal Gates or the careless attempts of lesser Celestials to alter events set in stone by higher powers. The **Dadaevum Cluster** consists of bizarre and parodic mockeries of the Skyriver galaxy, said to have been created for the amusement of or to clean up the messes created by Co Pana Cine, the deific sibling of Ibon'aci. Finally, the **Fautaevum Cluster** consists of realms made by lesser Celestials known as Demiurges who took inspiration from the Osiarch's creation of Skyriver but act independently of them without their official sanction. The Cephalons had earlier informed me of the following systems within the interior region of Apeiron. I have opted to ignore their

[250] The Force Builders, an obscure Jedi sect, took inspiration from this myth, symbolically laying their own "cornerstones" at the foundation of their temples on Alistan Nor, Fennesa, and Zoh.

[251] Many inhabitants native to Apeiron, such as the Cephalons, came to settle Skyriver during the Cosmic Wars, leaving their origins difficult to determine. However, it is theorised that such species might include the Zathrii and Lukovel amongst others.

inane babblings on supposed wonders beyond comprehension like infinite staircases and bottomless holes until I can subject these phenomena to rigorous scientific study. These are my recorded thoughts on this:

> The throneworld from which I shall one day extend my dominion across all of Apeiron, **Cephalonia** is the homeplanet of those ganglionic intelligences that served as the original basis of my experiments. The surface of the planet is even stranger than anything said to reside in deepest Illathurion or fabled Mlok, utterly incomprehensible to those who cannot perceive four-dimensional space. I have ordered my new vassals to erect a transdimensional receiver to facilitate easier traversal between Apeiron and my laboratory in Skyriver – what these surprisingly primitive creatures describe as a "monolith" that will house my "essence." Regardless of their misconceptions, I have seeded Cephalonia with my temporal-alchemical experiments and infused this world with the natural energies of the so-called "dark side" of the Force, ensuring their obedience in my absence until I can return.
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> Believed to be a mirror image of the lost Human homeworld, **Apterra** is a rarity in the realm of Apeiron: while changes to a single event otherwise tend to create ripples that compound exponentially, its inhabitants seem destined to follow the same destructive patterns regardless of variations.[252] The Cephalons claim that Ibon'aci once used the planet to experiment on Humans, introducing different variables, allowing them to run their course, and then rewinding time to tweak the conditions. Since his departure, the Humans have been left to their own devices but largely repeat the same cycle of behaviours as has been observed in Skyriver, with one notable exception: they have somehow become aware of the malleability of time in Apeiron and sought to exploit it, travelling into their own past to affect desired changes in their present and future with predictably disastrous results.
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> A world of endless grasslands shrouded in green mist, **Susuum** is said to follow an orbit that achieves interdimensional alignment with the lost planet of Sol. The Cephalons claim that Ibon'aci, seeking to guide the Human species along a more benevolent course, entrusted the wisest leaders of Sol with jewelled *Signs* that were passed down through the ages. These Temporal Gates allowed those who held them to visit Susuum, where they might congregate and share wisdom before returning to their original epoch. Even amongst the more enlightened and advanced species of Apeiron, Susuum is renowned for its plenaries, symposia, and philosophical debates.
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> A barren moon in orbit of a dim and dying star, **Wirut** is inhabited by a sapient species of fungoid shapeshifters. With their homeworld having little left to offer them, the Wirutid shed their spores into the vacuum to be carried forth by solar winds to

[252] The other planets in the system were similarly replicated and used for experimentation, with the fourth an especially bizarre world of confusing and contradictory terrain, lifeforms, cultures, and architecture.

other systems where they might yet thrive. Upon taking root, they adopt the form of innocuous plants notable only for their sudden and rapid spread. However, within their seed pods, outwardly identical doppelgangers of the nearest sapient lifeform gestate, emerging late at night to murder and replace the being whose likeness they possess. Their small population has ensured that the inhabitants of Apeiron keep them in check, but I have procured a number of Wirutid spores and brought them to my laboratory on Coruscant for further experimentation and research.

Legend has it that an experiment into the dark nature of humanity culminated in Apterra being sundered by a cataclysmic civil war between hyper-advanced civilisations, an iteration that Ibon'aci resolved by reversing the flow of time. However, several lost fragments of the planet were cast into deep space, where they coalesced to form the tiny, moon-sized desert world of **Katapuk**. Surviving subterranean temple drew religious pilgrims and nomads to the planet until the coming of Çetinanç the Sorcerer, an Apterran dark side exile seeking caches of lost technology. Enslaving the planet's inhabitants with his necromantic legions of the dead, Çetinanç established a dark side theocracy until his obsession with reclaiming Apterra saw his empire fall at the hands of a hero wielding a mythical sword of lightning.

Orbiting four vernal stars and necklaced by a dozen moons, **Hestan** is a former garden world now wracked by extremities of seasons and cycles. Upon its surface lies the ruins of the once-great city of Kalood, populated by time-priest worshippers of Ibon'aci until a heretical ritual disrupted the space-time of the planet relative to the rest of the system: a small distortion that compounded over eons to ravage its civilisation. Hestan is the origin of the psychedelic known as souvara, a variant of spice that users claim allows them to experience past lives.[253]

A desert world inhabited by the Gebbite Priests who departed Hestan, **Apshai** is covered in pyramids and temples erected in Ibon'aci's image. Before her untimely demise, it is said that Thargorograht attempted to penetrate the Infinity Realm to learn its secrets, successfully extending her Great Web into this realm. However, she foolishly dispatched her Apshaidian servitors, that xenophobic and narcissistic race which secretly worshipped their namesake over their Insect Goddess. Regarding Apeiron as a promised land where they might break free of their bonds of servitude, the Apshaidians deemed that initial conquest a paradise and decided to stay. They renamed it after themselves and took over many of the temples of Apshai, hoarding its wealth and secrets, while profaning the planet with strange rites and foul rituals.

Another world used by Ibon'aci to conduct experiments on Humans, **Thel** has been divided into thousands of unique provinces which each possess different systems of

[253] Though souvara loses most of its potency outside of Apeiron, its derivative forms appear to be the basis of similar forms of spice brought into Skyriver, including liao and plutonium (which is often cut with Nyborg to compensate for the reduced quality).

government, cultural practices, social norms, technology levels, economic mixes, and countless other variables. While nominally ruled by a capital region, travel between provinces is heavily restricted and borders are closely guarded, with many communities unaware of the existence of each other save at the highest levels of government. Despite their many divergences, all provinces on Thel are adherents of the Church of Artificial Intelligence, a state-sponsored religion enacted following the Oblation of Pithem to allow the planet to serve as a refuge for some of the earliest self-aware and manumitted androids.

Tencton is a dry and dusty arid planet, inhabited by a species of humanoids distinguished by hairless, elongated heads adorned with wavelike patterns. After being betrayed by their Apshaidian allies, the insectoid Vindar fled to Tencton to continue their plans of building an empire, conquering and enslaving its native inhabitants. Derisively referring to them as "squidges" and "slags," the Vindar genetically reengineered the Tenctonese to adapt to and work in almost any environment, exploiting them as slave labourers. Tenctonese children are separated from their parents by the Vindar at the age of ten to be assigned to castes, with the most promising specimens stripped of any empathy to serve as brutal overseers of their fellow slaves. Though rebellions are brutally suppressed, the adaptability bred into the Tenctonese allows escapees to rapidly assimilate into and interbreed with other cultures.

A world of lawless variety and inimitable grotesquery, **Fortaevum** is another planet supposedly created to facilitate the experiments of Ibon'aci. From its climate to its topography to the very laws of physics themselves, Fortaevum is a world where nothing is fixed and only random chance reigns. Such an environment pushes the laws of mutation, natural selection, and evolution to the utmost limits, giving rise to millions of unique strains of flora and fauna and thousands of native sapient lifeforms. With these constant, ever-shifting forces driving entire species to extinction just as swiftly as they emerge, the sapients of Fortaevum have entered into a curiously peaceful coexistence – each being so radically different to any other that they lack a distinct or coherent racial identity.

Hidden deep within the space-time tangle known as the Gulf of S'glhuo, **Auseil** was created by Ibon'aci to further certain experiments upon the revelation that music and sound were inextricably linked to the foundational building blocks of the cosmos. Its sonic-based lifeforms innately vibrate and resonate across various frequencies, seeking harmony with the first songs at the start of time. Despite their failure to reproduce that original music, their efforts have created periodic if short-lived bridges to other places including the Earthworlds, Corundum, and Illathurion, through which other mysterious players from beyond the void are said to have penetrated Apeiron in turn. Incomprehensible even by the standards of Apeiron, it is said that Auseil can only be truly perceived by those afflicted by blindness, muteness, or curiously, deafness.

The Aing-Tii Monks make few of their texts available to outsiders, but some of the scant handful to have been pilfered or acquired by other means speak of a place where "all light converges and time meets." This phrase is echoed in the fragmentary surviving texts of proto-Jedi sects, yet the modern Order arrogantly dismisses such references as a mere allegorical invention. It is abundantly clear to me that the Aing-Tii and others were speaking quite literally of **Omnaevum**, a mist-enshrouded world where visions of past, present, and future may be divined. Even if one manages to reach Omnaevum, only the worthy may unravel the secrets shrouded in ever-shifting fog, for the planet not only offers glimpses of moments in time but the capacity to change them. The world is protected by an order of Force users known as the Chronomancers, flow-walkers of various sects who discovered the planet and dedicated themselves to protected it against pernicious influences.

Pictographic murals on the Deep Core planet of Altrus speak of an advanced, pre-Republic civilisation, which attempted to escape an ancient war by penetrating the mythical World Between Worlds. Their failed experiments instead delivered them to **Sidamyr Taroft,** a veritable land of the lost that serves as a nexus of temporary breaches in and out of Apeiron. The Altrusians attempted to rebuild their great civilisation on the planet, introducing localised climate control, seasonal adjustments, and other technological marvels. However, much like the Gree, the Sharu, and the Gaoul before them, the Altrusians devolved into primitivism, reverting into a primitive race of warlike, reptilian savages.

Apoth is the final refuge of the Masters of the Pa Tho, the pyramidal Firstborn race that sought to travel back in time to erase the scourge of Humanity from existence.[254] Despite their initial victories, higher powers intervened to thwart the Pa Tho and save Humanity from extinction. Chastened by the experience, the Pa Tho modified their Temporal Gate – the Great Subcrustal Tubeway – to ferry refugees across locations in Skyriver and entrusted that network to the Resolute, before vanishing into exile. Despite their fallen nature, few dare to disturb their remnants on Apoth given their lingering reputation and advanced technology.

A timeless adage holds that if you give a billion Kowakian monkey-lizards an equal number of datapads and just as many years, they will inevitably reproduce the entire works of Lyechusas. Such a cliché borders on literal truth upon **Geborrose**, a library-world that puts the likes of Obroa-skai, Woostri, and Hevron to shame. Within hexagonal cells, which not only cover the entire surface of the planet but extend in tunnels and towers for miles in either direction, lie ancient tomes containing every conceivable ordering of the letters of the High Galactic alphabet. The answers to the greatest mysteries of the cosmos are said to be hidden amidst a sea of pure gibberish

[254] Rarely seen in the flesh even before their exile to Apeiron, the Pa Tho came to be known as the Travellers, Walkers, and Tripods due to the shape of the interdimensional exploratory vessels they seldom exited from.

punctuated by isles of banality, but visiting scholars are advised to be wary: the Purifiers, a fanatical remnant of the ancient Gree, are said to roam the cells, purging everything they deem nonsensical in pursuit of the "Crimson Hexagon" – a fabled universal manual for their lost technology.

Once a renowned watchworld of the Fāta, **Legaevum** served to guard against the dream-creatures of Oneirichor penetrating the Earthworlds under the guise of beings of legend and myth. However, over time, its guardians slowly succumbed to ennui, becoming corrupt, decadent, and eventually deranged, abusing their mastery over the doorways into time to amass a priceless collection of historical artefacts. As their fall from grace became irreversible, these corrupted Fāta interbred with the Humans they had seeded on Legaevum to bring about heroic demi-offspring capable of inheriting their charge. Strong, swift, and agile, their inheritors continue to prevent monsters from spreading further in Apeiron.

Another watchworld of the Fāta now fallen into corruption, **Chronos** is a banking world where time is literally credits. Its inhabitants were once charged with measuring and allotting the predetermined lifespan of every being in the galaxy, before producing a record of their existence from birth to death – and beyond, if necessary. Like their brethren on Legaevum, they grew corrupt over the eons as they came to realise they held the most precious commodity in existence in the palm of their hands: time. Though forbidden from stealing it, they found that most sapients were more than willing to trade it in exchange for other things, leading them to debase themselves as the so-called Time Merchants. Eventually, they lured their most loyal customers and those they had ensnared to Chronos, giving rise to a Human-dominated world where time was traded in lieu of any currency.

Those foolish enough to attempt to penetrate Apeiron without understanding the physics of space-time invariably find themselves stranded on the Eternal World of **Aeternaevum.** Existing in a state beyond temporality – and both the life and death that come with it – they are trapped in an endless purgatory of consciousness amidst the glacial wastes beneath unlit stars. Vessels belonging to those with a more sophisticated grasp of temporal physics traverse the Eternal World without such concerns, collecting specimens frozen in time for study and analysis or as macabre exhibits.

Perpetually wracked by Force storms that scour its surface from pole-to-pole, **Rauggoth** is a forbidden planet considered taboo by the inhabitants of Apeiron. Said to have penetrated Apeiron from *elsewhere* with the coming of the Timeless Ones, Rauggoth is the origin of the mysterious, sentient artefact known as the Darkstaff. Whether wielded by worthy hands such as Darth Dreadwar and Malleatus or fools like Darth Rivan and Set Harth, the Darkstaff has consistently been documented as

demonstrating a mind of its own.[255] Whether for a higher purpose or its own twisted amusement, those it takes an interest in are often swept through time and space to Rauggoth to eke a living amidst its blasted wasteland. When I return to Apeiron, I shall journey to Rauggoth and, like Dreadwar the Magnificent before me, bend the Darkstaff to my superior will.

Declared off-limits by all the spacefaring species of Apeiron, **Morta** is a haunted world of mist-enshrouded swamps and forbidding deserts dotted in the ruins of an extinct civilisation.[256] The native inhabitants of Morta were once an advanced species united by a hivemind, until strange whispers intruded on their collective with promises of apotheosis and began the rumblings of discord. As Mortan civilisation descended into what had once been unthinkable – civil war – those who had been severed from the hivemind obeyed the instructions given to them. In so doing, they unwittingly created an Infernal Gate that opened unto the Charnel Worlds, bringing doom to their kind, seeing their world overrun by Rozzum, and unleashing the strange Malignancy that tainted almost every plant, animal, and even machine still left.

The legend of Tet-Ami, the "Guardian of Time," is an intriguing example of several civilisations with no recorded contact or interaction with one another nevertheless developing a shared mythology. According to the inhabitants of Jerne, Benja-Rihn, Crusis, and others, Tet-Ami was one of seven divine beings who incarnated into physical form and was entrusted to watch over the fundamental building blocks of the universe, before dying and reincarnating once every millennium. Though the understanding and interpretation of this myth differs wildly between various cultures in Skyriver, the story seems to trace its origin to Apeiron. According to the Cephalons, Tet-Ami was a Fāta who incarnated on **Janovus-α** before departing for Skyriver, with the rebirth of his final incarnation on its twin world of **Janovus-Ω** serving as a harbinger of the end of all things. He was said to carry with him a jade box containing a relic corresponding with the fabled Orb of Passage.

Much like Tet-Ami, various species native to the Arc d'Stot speak of a planet that once existed within their sector before being removed from both space and time – a myth that predates any of them attaining spaceflight.[257] This legend corresponds with

[255] A devoted follower of Darth Ruin, Malleatus reclaimed his Master's cane and Eradicus' armour from the Mandalorians, before manipulating them into going to war against his rival Sith Lords. There is considerable debate regarding who, if anybody, created the Darkstaff – or if it was merely summoned from Apeiron, with the initial conjurer claiming the credit. While Darth Dreadwar is the earliest historical figure proven to have wielded it, fragmentary records speak of a Daritha Rauggoth, with it remaining unclear whether the planet was named in his honour or he merely derived his title from a pre-existing legend.

[256] This prohibition did not prevent servants of the Timeless Ones from absconding with Mortan technology, including the dreaded amaranth spheres containing a murderous rage-inducing virus.

[257] The Arc d'Stot made for a convenient layover on my recent expedition to Terminus. If nothing else, I can confirm firsthand that the native Gandaharians and *Palmiens* do indeed share such a legend, though it remains unclear when it first arose within their respective cultures. My prior expedition exploring the myth of Tet-Ami leads me to suspect that Darth Ramage is correct on this point, but I cannot verify it conclusively.

Perdide, a colony world claimed by the heretical followers of a rogue Guardian of Time. Identifying the moment in its history most conducive to their settlement, their Federation of the Masters of Time removed Perdide from the Skyriver galaxy to claim it as their own. Their near-creation of a paradox prevented Perdide from being returned to its natural place for fear of compounding the issue, despite the Nytocris having established a foothold on the planet at the time of its discontinuation; an infestation they chose to address by seeding Perdide with carnivorous bowl-flowers, engineered to mimic and attract insectoid prey.

Following a prolonged and eccentric orbit around blue and yellow binary stars, **Mohaun Los** is covered in sweet-smelling plains of moss and lichen punctuated by primordial jungles, fungi forests, and flower-laden valleys. This idyllic world is shared between two sapient species: the diminutive, peaceful Psounas and the savage, half-bestial Gholpos. While conflicts between the two species are common, the technological superiority of the former and the superstitious nature of the latter have prevented these disputes from escalating into prolonged, devastating wars. Acting only in self-defence, the Psounas maintain an otherwise irenic civilisation, renowned for its scent-feasts and feats of astronomy and mathematics.

A ringed planet in the Unknown Regions, **Jocacea** had the poor fortune to exist within a system breached by the time worms upon their initial escape from Apeiron. Though this rift was believed closed, a small subspace tear facilitated localised time travel in ways that compounded into multiple, cascading paradoxes. As these were largely contained on Jocacea, without affecting events in the rest of Skyriver, the entire planet was removed and relocated in Apeiron, where the proper course of events could be restored.

The twin planets of **Aspereola** and **Stereola** follow an unstable orbit around their star that leads directly into a centre halo, a passage through space and time gnawed open by an ancient time worm. While the former is a lush, bountiful paradise, the latter is a barren world perpetually scoured by storms of acidic sand. Prior to the centre halo hardening and collapsing in on itself, the twin planets' orbit caused them to briefly pass through and manifest in the Unknown Regions of Skyriver. Due to the effects of time dilation, they could be reliably predicted to appear every eight minutes – despite following a 165-year orbital journey within Apeiron to reach the same point.

A tidally-locked world, **Odju-Fyf** is a technologically-deficient planet divided between two feudal kingdoms that inhabit the sunward and nightward side respectively. The knights of each kingdom wage war upon primitive animal mounts, wielding swords and slugthrowers, with their technological stalemate allowing bandits to thrive in the twilight band between hemispheres. It is said that the shattering of the Sunstar-Shadowstone resulted in the creation of a white hole near Odju-Fyf that enters into a rare alignment with the Endor Gate. This cosmic event produces an eruption of coherent energy in Apeiron which is then vented into Skyriver through the

Endor Gate, explaining some of the temporal anomalies that occur in that region of space.[258]

Grown from a seed gifted to Ibon'aci by the mythical Crystal Rider known as Orax, **Iarainn** is a scintillating jewel of lambent spires and refulgent, coruscating valleys. Serving as a refuge for the crystalline offspring of Hidden Pithem, such as the Lignan and Pulas, Iarainn is said to be riddled with secret pathways connecting it and Apeiron to the Otherworld of Corundum. The surface and orbit of the jewel world are littered with a graveyard of wrecked starships, whose crystal-based hyperdrives or cargoes achieved a state of harmonic resonance with the inhabitants of Iarainn, causing them to push through normal hyperspace to unwittingly penetrate Apeiron.

The Sith and the Cephalons possess a shared mythology in which the arrival of Ibon'aci and his siblings introduced death to Skyriver, though the latter have inserted a curious addendum to the original legend. They claim that the juvenile deity did not intend this, and, in his attempts to understand the strange phenomenon of life and death, he created **Apmictlan**, a world in which the dead are laid bare in the "same white-shelled forms of the original tiny non-movers" before being guided to an unseen realm once they prove worthy. Between the layers of allegory and superstition that I had to decipher in order to penetrate Apeiron, and the fact that Apmictlan is considered off-limits to the living, this taboo world is no doubt a cemetery containing the tombs of ancient kings and their records, artifacts, and treasures.

Nestled between a pair of black and white holes, the Maki Danro system consists of five small worlds in orbit of a dwarf star. Its planets, moons, and orbits are dotted with the ruins and derelicts of several extinct civilisations, which were drawn to the system to study its unique quantum and temporal phenomena. A native sapient species has since evolved on its second planet, **Puutakka**, with the four-eyed, semi-aquatic humanoids on the cusp of reverse-engineering space flight technology, oblivious to the fact that their star is showing signs of imminent expansion.

[258] The description of this planet matches a report filed by General Han Solo shortly after the Battle of Endor, where he described the *Millennium Falcon* being transported to a sector that didn't correspond to any known starcharts. Due to the lack of a credible scientific explanation at the time, beyond the Ast Kikorie relay detecting unusual energy readings emanating from the Endor Gate, this incident was classified and subsequently forgotten. I asked Voren Na'al to follow up on the matter, and he reported that Solo confirmed the planet's name despite not yet being privy to this report.

FROM THE ADVENTURES OF R2-D2 AND C-3PO

"Love is of the Light itself, the strongest Force of all,
Passion is but the moonbeam to the light of the sun,
And we are the Shadow-folk,
Who will die when the full light strikes us."
~"A Lament for Beudag," a Muurshantre composition

"Catumaren ships have broken the Black Ring!"

It was one of dozens of announcements that had been made by Mistress Mnemos and others in the past few hours. "The United Races of the Great Grimalkin, symbolized in the Cathar Act of Deference, have come to the aid of the embittered Catumen against the Pyramid-ships of Kordil. They are a force that will not easily be stopped."

Others had followed a similar trajectory. The Snow, Jungle, and Forest Peoples of the Xaczhick were integrated for the first time since the Primeval Age; Wookiees fought alongside Toma, Akurian, and Bendone. These had been some of the successes of what they were calling the *final* war… the tragedies too horrific to bear… a galaxy betrayed by its political leaders in concert with the megacorporations, Intergalactic Banking Clan, and other forces, darker forces, hidden for years too long to count.

For the so-called End of All Things, one would assume their holdout would have been grand and ornate, within a temple of great significance, perhaps, or upon a world that held symbolic meaning. It may be that other headquarters across the galaxy could boast that, but not this one. Here, the war room housed few warriors; its luminous representation of constellations, beasts, and geometric shapes etched in glowing patterns across the otherwise starry ceiling and walls marked its unconventional nature, while its lambent window-frames that projected images of the vast and terrible forces bearing down on the galaxy made it altogether surreal; the floors were at least rendered opaque to avoid disorientation. Of course, this timeless dimension, as a conduit to others, held no small significance, even if not many knew of it.

They had recently jumped to this location, with the door to their domain now hidden within the Lirasan Nebula and protected by a fleet of fierce Lasat and a host of Neebray that had joined them. Would that they could exit time-space entirely, they might, but that was not how their realm functioned. *Apart* from time-space did not mean disconnected from it, but rather transconnected. Hence, there was always a hidden lintel to every realm the In-Between touched upon.

If their hub was odd, the persons who currently inhabited it were far odder. Mistress Mnemos took up one corner. Archon-Ood sat on the other side across from her. Between the radiant outlines of the windows and the dancing lights and colors each of the supercomputers produced, often accompanied by a variety of chimes, whistles,

and bells designed for sapient beings who found silence unnerving, it might be forgiven if one thought the chamber seemed more like an underground dance club than a place where the War of Darkness and Light was being fought.

The two giant supercomputers had been transported there along with all the other residents by rather unusual means. But they were not the only colorful and important occupants the Mind-Matrix had invited. Queen Cherlindrea had brought four of the Valdilar with her, two of which were engaged in a hearty debate: one appeared to be a Dragon, though of a smallish size, who went by the name Keltion; the other, named Silew, appeared as a great Eellayin. A tall, elderly man with a long, white beard stood amongst them as well; he was known as Anodos. Beaming as they were with empyreal power, they paled to she who stood in their midst; spectral as an ice sculpture, she was the striking and stately Queen Lirazel. As if descended from the boreal moon, she was the Sybil of snow and norland light, formerly of the ancient Diathim before grief took her, for it was said that she'd known misery in ways that most could not, before the madness of Oneirichor took hold. Her name in the days of Polarion had been Ilyria.

Several Asogians milled about, along with Princess Teebara and a Dulok Protector of Endor. Saxxon, the Chief Rabbit of the Lepi, had been invited, as had the ancient Guardian of Thra, several Hoojibs, an assortment of Lurrians, Ithorians, Yuuzhan Vong, Chiss, Verpine, and three Force-users: a Tchuukthai Adept of the White Current; a Whiphid Jedi nicknamed Tuggle who was the descendent of K'Kruhk; and Mellic Saa, one of the strong adult saplings of the Neti, T'ra Saa, who belonged to the Potentium. These were but some of the races represented there. There was also a host of droids scurrying about like mice in a field, including an old R5 unit and an even more beat-up groundmech salvage assist unit. About the chamber trotted a pack of Great Wolves.

This battlefield was but a pinprick of flame on a map too vast to be realized upon which the conflagration of war had spread from end to end. Force-users, along with the Oswaft, Silentium, and numerous Defenders new and old were making their stand. In this final conflict, there were no longer heroes on both sides. There were Champions of Light and Legions of the Dark.

Due to the Jedi Hunters and Acolytes of the Sith, the Jedi had nearly gone extinct. Thanks to the efforts of Margrave Juro, with the aid of Lah Zhima and Lah Kara, those sensitive to the Force who walked in the Light were found and gathered, trained, and given the now extremely rare Kyber crystals mined on their world of Hy Izlan in the Outer Rim. Strong, proud, and fearless in the face of encroaching extinction, they did not value their lives above their duty *to* life and the living.

Amon Lith, the Guardian of Forever—yet housing the personalities of the thousands of surviving Alashanians whom he'd rescued—had shrunk himself to fit within the chamber. The creature smiled ruefully as he presented a progress report to the supercomputers. Having been healed of his madness, the Guardian of Forever now fought alongside Vuffi Raa, an agent of the Silentium who, conversely, had grown quite gargantuan in order to strike down those arcane vessels that had penetrated the outer defenses in the rareified space outside their dimensional capsule.

Their nemesis knew they'd jumped. Loud explosions shook the chamber, though the volume they might otherwise have produced was lessened by the invisible sound-absorbing "walls," if such dimensional barriers could be called that. But even elements made of stardust could only do so much when the forces seeking entrance were only partly corporeal themselves.

As displayed within the circular-shaped windows, the picture was grim. It was not merely that their Defenders would be snuffed out for the sake of some twisted scorched-galaxy policy—for everyone there had already accepted the fact that death was at hand and made peace with it—it was that if they gained access to the nexus in which they stood, it would mean the Enemy would escape the galaxy, the Skyriver dimension, and gain access to *all* galaxies and dimensions in the vast universe.

"They're not going to forget us so easily," announced the Lepi named Saxxon. "But if it's a fight they want, they'll get it." The Lepi warrior was a descendant of the well-loved Jaxxon and heir to the O'Hare dynasty. Along with Lop of Tao, they were some of the most famous of the lagomorphs whose adventures were renowned galaxy-wide. His pedigree hadn't helped him get elected to Chief Rabbit on Coachelle Prime, though not for lack of trying; that legacy stubbornly remained in the line of descendants from the famous Jackrabbit Jazz... *Not that that mattered much anymore*, he thought. Lepi ships were amongst the fastest in the galaxy, a fact that had been a well-kept secret amongst them for millennia and one of several secrets that the Allied Races had shared in recent days.

"Cherlindrea, you're having another vision," stated Botanicus, the elder Asogian and Lord of Lucidulum. "What do you see?"

"It is the past," she stated. Since the start of the War of Darkness and Light, Queen Cherlindrea had been blind. Now, she saw only visions. But she was grateful, for those visions had aided countless peoples. "When the Necromantic Ones were awoken from their ages-long slumber at the dead heart of the Unknown Regions, they called forth the vilest of their kin and most devout... Now, the Lich Kings of the True Sith Empire lead in their terrible Ankath ships fashioned from the bones of the betrayed. Alongside them fly the Wraiths and Starweirds from the void. Maelibi erupt from the shattered portcullis of their underworld prison. Malevoiy bleed through the Old Gate on Andowyne. Urumolki seep out from the Space Between Spaces... If the last seal should be breached, they will break like a storm upon the seas, darkening all, absorbing power from everything around them, leaving planet upon planet, moon upon moon, sun upon sun little more than blackened husks..."

"I am afraid that eventuality is upon us," acknowledged Mistress Mnemos.

"Gone is the notion of order," replied Cherlindrea, "the wicked, hesternal dreams of Darths Nihl, Talon, Wyyrlok, and Havok... Now the two heads, dominion *and* chaos, are united as one under the Immortal Gods of the Sith."

As she grew silent, she was attended, for such horrific visions took their toll. For most, it was a cruel thing to be alive in these times, but they were not driven to despair. They did not deceive or distract themselves, for they had known of what was to come from history and seen the pieces fall into place just as the Wookiee historian

Halsyykh, who once served Senator Heria Organa, had warned. All they had to do was keep an eye on the Sith… if only their elected leaders hadn't been in league with them.

Some said it began with Darth Vader's apprentice, Dark Lady Lumiya. She had fractured the galaxy with civil war, causing the rise of the maddened Belot—or Abeloth as they knew her—all so that she might perpetuate the Rule of Two. With the Yuuzhan Vong priestess, Svelt Aller, nicknamed Vongerella, serving as her familiar, Lumiya emerged as Reeve of the Sith, training pupils such as Flint Baldir, Sovereign Protector Carnor Jax, Fosh Jedi Knight Vergere, Darth Homiiz, and, most tragically of all, Jacen Solo.

Meanwhile, from the carcass of the Dark Empire and the Rule of One descended the ashen silhouette of the Sidious legacy, orchestrated by Lord Shadowspawn and carried out first by Lord Hethrir and then by Palpatine's secret apprentice, Alkin Neret. While awaiting her master's return as the prophesied One who would restore the Sith to galactic sovereignty, Neret was tasked to gather Inquisitors, Empire Reborn, Imperial Sith Acolytes, and Nightsister Witches to establish a new order of Sith devotees on Korriban. Amongst these were Mas Amedda, who became the first Darth Wyyrlok; Sly Moore; Lady Deianeira Greejatus and her former rival, Lady Alinka Aloo; Tamith Kai; Lomi Plo; Darth Vindicaa, the dark clone of Asajj Ventress fashioned in secret on Kalakar Six; Masago; Tavion Axmis; Antinnis Tremayne and Aurra Sing, whose ancestor was XoXaan. Although Tremayne was killed in the Corporate Sector by his one-time pupil, Jaalib Brandl, this New Sith Order would prosper and be unified by A'Sharad Hett, a Jedi Master of the Old Republic who'd been raised by the Sandpeople of Tatooine. Hett proclaimed himself Darth Krayt and the *actual* One Sith Neret had been waiting for.

The chatter in the room increased again as everyone returned to their various tasks of monitoring the unfolding events, communicating warnings and guidance to trusted planetary and system leaders across the galaxy, and consulting with other war rooms. Not all who occupied the chamber served a crucial function; some were invited to serve as support, preparing food and drink and seeing to everyone's well-being, as there was no spatial limit to their pocket dimension.

"Silence!" commanded Mnemos. "Albert has informed me that the link between the BRTs and the Engines of Defense is working again. The Enemy will not so easily penetrate the Outer Rim."

Cheers rose up from all present. It was another rare bit of good news. As many BRTs as possible had been reassembled and brought back online. All of them were now connected via technological and supernatural means.

"You still can't find them?" asked Saxxon of the special task force that had gone out earlier.

"Lepi, that is the third time you've asked. We were not designed to monitor time and space beyond our own galaxy." Mistress Mnemos was feeling her circuits heat up.

Archon-Ood started to reply to her in a shared computer language until she remembered that Saxxon had earlier pleaded with them to, "Stop speaking whatever speed-of-light digital communication you're using! Speak Basic so the rest of us can understand you!" He was right to be anxious.

"Time is not on our side," she stated, "not even in the timeless dimension we now occupy, for even the pocket dimensions that follow their own time are tied to the larger galaxy that is governed by the Cosmic Clock." The Diatian Clockwork had been the first to sound the alarm and warn them that the hour was at hand.

"R5 has picked up a trace reading," Mnemos chimed. "I'm boosting the signal."

"Well done, my dear!" praised the Watcher. "We'll have them back in one piece, I'm certain of it!"

"They've been traveling in some ancient land!" puzzled Ralph, one of several who were intently studying holographic fields before them. A shapeshifter race from Frivoli, the Lumage were humorously referred to as "all-purpose animals" and held a reputation for dependability and kind-heartedness. He had been brought here by means of a Great Wolf, who'd then shapeshifted into Anodos when they arrived. Whether the other wolf-guardians who yet stood watch were also skin-changers, few in the chamber knew. "It appears C-3PO's lost his head again. R2 hasn't quite gotten the hang of things."

"And the time-space continuum?" asked Mother Aughra testily; tens of thousands of years old and quicker of mind than most younglings, she was not the only ancient presence that had been invited. Khory Bannefin, a warrior who'd been killed and brought back to life through an infusion of Wutzek's essence and the enchantment of Thorn Drumheller, was another. She kept those facts to herself, however. The Great Wolves had fetched her from her place as Sentinel to the Sacred Queen of Andowyne.

"Cannot be altered in the Prime," the Watcher reminded her.

"As far as we know," piped in the dog-like Lumage. "North America, early Twentieth Century. They've picked up a straggler, some dashing archaeologist from the looks of it."

"Are you sure you're not getting your wires crossed?" asked Botanicus.

"*Anything's* possible," Ralph acknowledged, flicking switches to make sure.

"It can't be helped," replied the Watcher, "alternate events from Apeiron and Hyperion keep cutting in!"

"What are those again?" asked Princess Teebara. The Ewok descendant of Chief Warrick and Queen Kneesa had been named after the legendary heroes Teebo and Latara. Her bond-mate, Drongo Ivav, was a Dulok.

"The Infinity Realm and the Echo Dimension," Ralph replied.

Mistress Mnemos lit up. "Those droids have a history of impulsivity," she retorted.

"Why are we getting interference from those realms *now*?" Archon-Ood asked.

"Something to do with the archaeologist that R2-D2 saved… *That's it!*"

"Of course! He's their ancestor. That must be creating a paradox!"

"Whose ancestor?" Saxxon had made it his business to ensure that everyone present was apprised of everything going on, particularly as the supercomputers tended to forget that not everyone was privy to everything they knew.

"Han Solo, of course," Mnemos chided.

"And the Skywalkers!" Archon Ood added.

"What if they're linking?" Mnemos asked more seriously.

"What if what's linking?" Saxxon asked.

"That would be a disaster," the Watcher noted, her lights radiating a rutilant hue. "But there does appear to be bleed."

"What would be a disaster?" Saxxon asked again.

"It's not possible," replied the Mind-Matrix.

"What's not possible?!" he demanded. He wasn't trying to be difficult, but he was the liaison between the supercomputers and everyone else there.

"The collapse of Skyriver's dimensions!" Mnemos and the Watcher said in unison.

"I have always ensured realm distinction," the Mind-Matrix stated calmly. "If that is breaking down and Skyriver, Hyperion, and Apeiron are colliding, it would mean—"

There was a brief hush. "Chaos," Saxxon said what they were all afraid to say. But now that he thought about it, *of course* that's what would be happening. The Enemy wasn't going after Skyriver alone but everything and anything attached to it.

"Maybe it is not chaos at all," declared Botanicus. "Maybe it is a *reunification*."

"I will keep a strict eye on this." Few knew that tiny parts of Hidden Pithem had remained in the galaxy, some of which had been recovered and restored: the Orb of Passage and the Codex were reunited and *plugged* back in, bringing the essence of the Mind-Matrix back for this final task. As to the Dark Codex and the stolen Crown Jewels, they belonged to the Enemy. By those means were they now able to find and break into this realm.

"We can't bother with any of that now," interrupted Aughra. "We need to retrieve those droids."

"Their events must play out organically," Mellic Saa informed them, "as do ours. We can assist, but we cannot force matters…"

"But if they do not fulfill their mission, then the sacrifices that so many died for will be in vain." Khory had objected to the plan the moment she'd heard it, arguing that no good could come from tampering with other dimensions. She had learned that from experience.

"If they fail, then another branch will come forth, or another tree will grow."

"Easy for you to say," Saxxon exclaimed. "Some of us don't live that long!"

"But what if it is not meant to be," Khory replied. "What if *we* were not meant to be. It may be that the merging of dimensions is intended to erase us entirely as if we had never been, as if we were mistakes…"

Saxxon audibly gulped. "Lady, you are *no* fun at parties."

"You are *no* mistake, Khory Bannefin," Anodos assured her. "This I know."

"And despite our many flaws, neither are any of us!" Lirazel concluded.

"Do not give in to fear," Keltion reassured everyone. "No story once told can be *untold*. They may be retold, hidden, defaced, misunderstood, or misinterpreted… but they cannot be erased by any of the enemies or foulcraft at their disposal."

"Neither Old Ones nor Outer Gods nor even the Queen of the Hellworlds could accomplish such a thing," the lionlike Silew added, "though no doubt they believe otherwise."

Dark thoughts had been assailing even the stoutest hearts since the start of the war. For this reason had Queen Cherlindrea asked her companions to join them.

Other Diathem were busy throughout the galaxy, emboldening other hearts to stave off despair, which had been as deadly as any weapon brought to bear.

Another crash reverberated throughout the chamber.

"If these readings are correct, the droids have been on numerous adventures since we sent them out," Mother Aughra remarked gruffly, temporarily shifting her attention from the digital orrery before her. Her assignment, and that of those who worked under her, was to realign systems that came under threat, mitigate the damage, and save lives. She could not stop the heartbreaking reality of planets and suns being eradicated nor slow the all-encompassing Darkness that was snuffing out entire sectors when Mnggal-Mnggal and the Outer Gods passed through them, but she could shift stars and planets back into their proper orbits or into new orbits; she could even hide them behind celestial phenomena or put them in temporary pocket dimensions. The only problem was that not even an army could do this fast enough to save them all. "Whoever gave that droid the key must have left out the instructions!" She had learned from that mistake when raising her own child.

"I wish there was more we could do," exclaimed Princess Teebara. Though she would rather be "out there fighting," she had given her word to serve as protector of this phalanx. Her own world was safe enough now that the Indur had reasserted control, boosting the Monitors and Protectors into a tightly-knit web. No villain who entered the Moddell Sector would return. They had also called upon the Gharial races to unite under a new and benevolent Endless Empire. To it, hundreds of reptilian races flocked, including the Sobekk remnant, and these were now amongst the fiercest opponents of the Enemy.

As it stood, Teebara, Drongo, Tuggle, Mellic Saa, Saxxon, Khory, the Lurrians, and the Great Wolves had already fought off and killed a horde of weird robots that had broken into their chamber at their previous location and a host of foul Rozzum prior to that. The insane, grotesque, nameless things had been sent to kill, crush, and destroy everyone there. Thus far, they had utterly failed… but that could change.

"The nine heads of Nemesis sit on the Nine Thrones!" Cherlindrea announced loudly to the horror of all present. "Bogan has seen the last of the seals broken!" Everyone knew what that meant, but she carried on, unable to stop herself. Her eyes widened as her feet lifted off the ground and she began a slow spin: "The gates to the Unknown Regions are flung open! The unspeakable multitudes that dwelt within spill out in endless waves. The Dark Crusade is underway. The Old Ones arise. Exterminator Droids, Abominor, and Drej fly to war; Ishaa's innumerable armies march to revenge! Cacodemons and Wraiths hunt and kill with the Draconian Empire who now lead the Sith worlds of the Caldera! From the Gap come the Crakull Mages, Sorcerers of Rhand, End Lords of Azrayl, the Canted Circle, Polydroxol, the Final Occultation, and other Heralds of the Void. At the last comes the Crawling Chaos in its true form to blow away the dust of all the planets and earths… In the Void are all that was feared in our darkest dreams, for the gods of the dark tapestry have convened, and the baleful stars are now aligned."

"Perhaps they will turn on each other," said Tuggle hopefully. "That is their old pattern, is it not?"

"They will not," she returned. "Now, at the end, there is no dissent. There are none who question; none who concern themselves with petty power struggles or methodologies, for the Black Suns have empowered Black Angels, and Crimson Moons align before Shadow Kings. I see it, horrors beyond comprehension. They soar forth with the Eaters to exterminate all life in the galaxy, bent on the single goal of casting this dimension into oblivion and remaking the galaxy so that all the worlds are as Shadow Worlds…."

Silence followed her words as she came out of her trance. "Perhaps, dearest Cherlindrea," started the Watcher, "we might tone some of that down…"

An R5 droid chimed, a welcome respite. He'd had a vocabulator installed, but he still sometimes fell back on old habits. As a Force-sensitive droid, he'd laid low for a time. The combined ability to do what both organics and machines could do was something that was not appreciated by either. How he became that way was a source of great speculation, and those who knew would only smile; thankfully, times had changed and he was no longer alone. T0-B1 and the Iron Knights were also Force-sensitive, the latter made by the Shards that inhabited them, and there were thousands now spread across the galaxy serving the Light.

"Ronyards has defeated the Eastern Armada!" announced Mother Aughra. The Hoojib on her shoulder twittered like a bird.

"*Ronyards?*" exclaimed Saxxon with disbelief. "*The Garbage World?*"

"Droids believe their Maker rules from there," the Tchuukthai explained.

"You mean one of the Silentium?" retorted Saxxon.

"We believe there is more to the story," Silew said with a wink.

"Whoever or whatever it is, it's not alone," the Tchuukthai broadcast. The Hoojibs pointed at one of the screens. "Apparently *all* of the garbage worlds have come to life. The Arcadia system just took out over five hundred enemy ships!"

"You're saying that *planets* are going to war?" the Chiss, Mitth'em'tawh, known to his friends as Themta, said incredulously, lifting his head from the crucial calculations he'd been working on. "What kind of offensive measures could they possibly have!"

Had you heard of Solanus, you'd know, stated Qlif telepathically to those in the conversation, now hopping on top of Saa's right branches and pointing with his ears to the events playing out on another screen. *A single beam of water shot at just the right velocity took out an entire fleet!*

"Ronyards just led them into Hyperspace…" Botanicus showed them on the monitor. "They're joining up with Zonama Sekot, GNR-0, U-One, and D'voran!"

"There is more!" Cherlindrea proclaimed. "The Worms of El'Shuddem have risen up to fight for their Mistress! Millions have left their tunnels to destroy the Armies of Night."

"Say again?!" Saxxon gasped.

"The Fell Worms have no *mistress*," stated Mellic Saa.

"Our Neti friend makes a good point," Tuggle pondered aloud. "They could not on their own have done this. And why would they?"

"Much that we once thought impossible is coming to pass before our eyes," pronounced Queen Lirazel icily. "Soon, you will see more!"

"Never in all my many rings would I have thought to see this," Mellic replied after a moment. "The Kindalo had gone to the bitter end, but in so doing they have broken the Heads of the Serpents…"

"And Abeloth has arisen again!" Cherlindrea cried out, scrying the unfolding events. There was an audible intake of breath from several, but she was heedless of it and continued. "He that awoke in the Sunken City, born again by the dark magicks of his daughter, will rise no more. Belot has slain the Great Priest!"

"Does anyone understand that?" asked Saxxon.

It is good news! Qlif projected into everyone's minds the very scene as he picked it up from Cherlindrea.

"That is not all," Anodos added. "The Great Spider Queens and their Daughters have allied with the king and queen of Neverwhere to cleanse Illathurion; they are slaughtering all of the Enemy!"

"That we have lived to see such days!" One of the Ithorians marveled. "Ever were they caught between light and shadow… They have chosen the former. Prophecies come to pass. Star Dragons hunt the Darkness. The Imperishable Flame is at work in the Universe!"

"It is not *all* good news, I'm afraid," Archon-Ood stated. "The Kindred have… *merged* with the Lord of Corruption! They are an immensity beyond imagining! The Corporate Sector was their first objective. It is no more!"

"The *entire* Corporate Sector?!" asked Botanicus in horror.

"The Lord of Corruption has swallowed it."

"That's definitely *not* good news," Saxxon drawled, his ears straight up.

"Companions Esk and Forn are gone…" alerted Mother Aughra. "The Ancient Ones are targeting the Dwarves first!"

"I must go fight!" demanded Khory.

Several protested, but it was Teebara who convinced her to stay. "If they should fail, my forces and I will not be enough, for in this room stand the windows and doors. If they are breached…!"

"Soon enough, you and I will go to battle," Queen Lirazel said to her, grasping her arm as a fellow warrior, "and they will be no match for *us!*"

"We need to find those droids!" Saxxon quipped.

As if in response, Ralph sputtered, "They're on the western coast of… oops, nope, they're gone again."

"They're coming back," said Mistress Mnemos.

"I can confirm that," echoed Archon-Ood.

At a great sigh of relief from the many there, R2-D2 and C-3PO materialized before them. "You're all here!" exclaimed C-3PO. "It's been oh so many years…" R2-D2 chirruped a sad sound.

"It's been *two* hours," Saxxon remarked.

"*Two hours!?*" C-3PO's eyes blinked in surprise. "Even with all my memories restored, I don't think I'll ever understand time travel!"

"We're glad to see you both in one piece," Mistress Mnemos chimed in before he could go off on a tangent. Of those gathered, only she was an old friend of the droid. "At one point, we heard you were destroyed by primitives and feared the worst!"

"Only in Apeiron was he truly lost," reassured Mnemos. R2-D2 chirped mournfully.

"The realms *are* colliding!" the Watcher informed. "We don't have much time."

"Did you complete your mission?" Aughra asked.

"Yeah, what happened?" Saxxon demanded.

"I'm afraid it's a rather *long* story…"

The Lepi rolled his eyes. "Just skip to the good parts!"

Another explosion rocked the chamber. This time, it was Vuffi Raa who destroyed the culprit. Amon Lith half-grudgingly smiled as the droid added another score to their running tally, an ancient if morbid custom.

"Oh dear," worried the protocol droid, "I see that the state of affairs hasn't changed very much."

R2 squealed a reminder.

"I'm getting to that, Artoo! As you are no doubt aware, we had a dual mission. The primary directive was to find and retrieve the Ark of Ryloth, for which reason we were cast through time, following the trail from Nebo to Axum, Aumghe, Sena, Lateran, and Tanis. We were thwarted by the Gray Shadows of Akator and their Human agents along the way until, finally, we arrived at a hangar in Groom Lake where the Xantar met us and took care of our adversaries… *and* the Ark."

"Well, they didn't do such a great job!" Aughra growled. "Taken it was from Al'Moab III and brought to Ryloth."

"Where it was given the name, the Ryloth Ark," Mistress Mnemos added. "The Twi'leks did not know what it was they truly possessed, save only that it was a powerful and priceless artifact from antiquity."

"So they fashioned a replica that they could display at Scardia Station," Archon-Ood continued, "only they made some changes to feature depictions of Twi'leks on the lid instead of the Diathim that were on the original."

"Both the replica and the original were stolen…"

"By whom?"

"Everyone wanted it—the Empire, Black Sun, Hutts, treasure hunters, gamblers, and pirates, but the original vanished entirely…" Mnemos finished. "Perhaps it was not meant to be found after all. What of the second part of your mission?" she addressed the droids.

"Artoo transmitted parts of the journal to those who might pass along our story. Before long, and with the aid of the Whills, many adventures were communicated for the world to read and even see!"

"Focused on you two, no doubt!" Saxxon complained. "Didn't you transmit the whole thing?"

"I'm afraid the Humans in the Primary Universe are rather short-lived and quite… *stressed*. They can handle only so much. Instead, we did something rather rash…" Seeing as everyone in the room had grown silent, anxious to hear what he meant by that, he resumed. "As you surmised, the galaxy's history is rather expansive for even

several Humans to convey. So, on my suggestion—*No, I am not bragging, Artoo-Detoo, merely telling them the facts*—the Whills made it so that anyone who sought to tell tales of our struggles would have them transmitted directly into their minds! As we explained to one of those we chose, 'This story is only one of thousands that could be told about the characters who inhabit the galaxy, but they are not stories *you* are destined to tell.' Before we departed, tales were being told of many early adventures, such as that of Thra and Andowyne," C-3PO addressed Aughra and Khory, "and of one of your rather truant companions!" He looked over at Botanicus.

"Where there's a Whill, there's a way," added Archon-Ood, who received merciless groans and a raspberry from R2-D2 for that remark.

"It is done, then," croaked a relieved Mother Aughra. "They are prepared for what may lie ahead." Her orrery sputtered and ceased functioning. She gave it a dirty look. "Have any come with you to aid us?"

R2-D2 groggled.

"Yes, I was just getting to that…" The protocol droid's tone turned somber. "Apparently, they believe it is all… *fiction*."

"Then, this whole endeavor has been for nothing!" complained Saxxon, his ears bending at crooked angles. The crowd murmured with uneasiness and looks of dread.

"I have watched this galaxy for a long time," Botanicus proclaimed, "just as I've watched the first Human world where my companion Zrek had gone to live. Many things that are true are believed to be false and many falsehoods true. This has caused no small calamity in all the worlds of the universe. However, in art, it is the *story* itself—and its meaning—that matter. Our purpose in sending forth these droids was not for vanity or aid, but to give the residents of the Primary World warning, hope, and courage. It was for *this* reason that all the tales of heroes and their adventures were imparted long ago—to embolden us to continue holding to the light against the encroaching dark! No matter how they are perceived, so long as the core meaning is present, then *we have done our jobs!* These droids deserve our praise…"

After considerable applause, with even the two supercomputers admiring the droids, much to C-3PO's delight, R2-D2 blooped a question to which his counterpart addressed the room: "I'm afraid to ask, but how goes *our* own battle?"

It was the dragon-shaped Valdilar, Keltion, who replied, "There have been significant victories, but the losses cannot be measured. More than half the galaxy is now under siege. The Unknown Regions are empty! Wild Space is close to being vanquished. I will not say what the death toll is. I will instead say this: *The Shadow draws near!* But there are things that we know that they do not. The purveyors of hate, violence, and greed do not win; the closer they come to their goal, the closer we are to victory…"

"This one speaks truth," Queen Lirazel stated. "Even as their dark stars align, our stars and moons are awoken. Starbirds and Sun Dragons have gathered the Elementals. Together, they are alighting anew in the cold expanse… and they will take the Enemy by surprise!"

"And powerful have the Defenders become," Silew added.

The chamber shook from another hit. No one knew how long their small pocket dimension could hold up to the assault. Vuffi Raa and the Guardian of Forever materialized in their smaller forms. "That was the last of the current wave," Vuffi declared.

"More good news, then?" asked Ralph hopefully.

"Good and bad," Vuffi Raa confessed. "Another wave is coming, much larger than the first… it is being led by one of the Leviathans… but no ordinary one. *It has seven heads and is even larger than the Balyeg*. It carries upon its back the Statue of Korman Lao. As formidable as the Guardian and I are, this is one of the Nine…" He didn't bother finishing the sentence.

"We will face them together," Amon Lith said to Vuffi Raa, "and triumph!"

"You will not go alone!" said Anodos, who again became the Great Wolf. "I will accompany you."

If the others felt uncertain about what a wolf, even a shapeshifting one, could do out in space, they didn't express it.

"We will join you!" Khory Bannefin declared. Queen Lirazel nodded.

"As will I," said Mitth'em'tawh.

"And I," added Keltion.

"I have a ship too," added Saxxon. "Fastest in the galaxy. Anyone who wants to join me is welcome!"

"So long as we have breath, we will guard this chamber!" growled Princess Teebara. Her Dulok mate growled in assent.

"As for us," the leonine Silew said, "we shall protect with our lives all who remain in this domain."

The Jedi and his companions took out and ignited their lightsabers, and the flame of hope arose in everyone's hearts.

"Let us depart then!" said the Guardian of Forever, "Eight against the universe!"

Nodding, Vuffi Raa, Amon Lith, Khory Bannefin, Queen Lizarel, Anodos, Saxxon, Keltion, and Mitth'em'tawh dematerialized and appeared outside their dimension. The screens showed their sleek ships roar by. Keltion expanded into a massive Dragon as Anodos grew and spouted powerful wings.

Before them gathered an armada of malevolent craft brimming with firepower capable of burning through suns, and behind them glided a gargantuan Leviathan with wings so vast they blotted out the stars.

Raw fear and loathing came upon those watching the eight warriors who feared then that they would die. If the eight felt fear as well, still they flew forward, for hope burned in their hearts. Then, as if out of a fantasy, from the east, a mammoth Djinn from the Kingdom of Dreams appeared. And from the west emerged the Empress Oswaft, who was larger than any Oswaft ever seen. Riding her was a giant, spectral woman, her white hair flying wild around her as she laughed. Behind them came two Star Dragons ridden by the king and queen of Illathurion, each wielding flaming swords, and all of their armies with them, a force immense and beyond reckoning.

From the perspective of those inside the war room, the image was a blur of collisions too incredible to be imagined. So extirpative had the destructive blasts been that the monitors blinked out. When they blinked back on again, all that could be

seen were moments… luminous points of light… a giant maw clamped down on a ship… a colossal hand crushing another… gargantuan tentacles whipping across space… a gargantuan sheet of ice cut through a fleet of wicked ships. Something roared then, a clamor too terrible to bear. Unfortunately, the screen flickered again just as the exterior walls began booming louder. The light from the walls, ceiling, and circular panes dimmed or went out altogether. After several minutes of silence, Tuggle said what he knew everyone was thinking: "I don't think they made it."

"Might we teleport to another time and place?" asked C-3PO.

"So long as the Enemy holds the Dark Codex, there is no safe place in time or space in which to travel," stated the Mind-Matrix. "They will find us… and we would only lead them to what few places are still safe."

A lethal mass of shuffling, snarling *things* materialized in the chamber. Princess Teebara, Drongo Ivav, and the Jedi led the charge with other defenders at their heels. Limbs and heads were severed; blood burst; horrid screeches were heard; the Rozzum were dispatched, though not without losses on the heroes' side and the awful knowledge that more were coming.

"I've lost communication with the other war rooms," R5 broadcasted.

"I lost them awhile ago," added Ralph. Mother Aughra and the others nodded in assent. They were cut off. Such a thing had never before happened. The Mind-Matrix *could not be cut off*. The remaining Great Wolves howled in grief. The stars appeared to wink out around until none could be found.

"Night and day are intermingled," Cherlindrea said hypnotically, in a trance at the worst possible time. "Destruction, Disease, Fiery arrows, and Terror are set loose. The two crowned heads rise triumphant. They have lifted their coils to strangle the Light and drown it in the black seas of oblivion… but it has just occurred to them that they have cause to be afraid."

"Do you know what she's talking about?" asked Tuggle.

"Yes… but it's probably best that you don't," said Archon-Ood.

Cherlindrea continued: "Malevoiy and Malelibi are on the move; the Dread Mother is proclaimed Queen of Skyriver… The unleashed denizens of the underworlds and counterworlds close in! Eternal night falls. The Outer Dark gloats supreme!"

"I'm afraid it is time to say farewell, friends," Archon-Ood intoned, her colors turning shades of blue.

"We can be proud that we've done our part," stated Mistress Mnemos.

"The rest is in the Maker's hands," Silew affirmed.

A loud blast saw all the lights vanish for a long moment. When they came back on, Silew and Cherlindrea had vanished.

The chamber grew silent with the weight of events so heavy that it threatened to crush them. Despite the hope the Celestials had repeatedly given of what was to come, they could not but feel a sense of doom. Several closed their eyes or embraced in a final farewell. C-3PO placed a hand on R2's dome and bravely stated, "Having been your companion all these years has been more than any droid could ask for." R2 crooned back a similar sentiment… and meant it.

Without warning, two lights appeared in the center of the chamber. The lights resolved to the spectral forms of Arhul Hextrophon and Cuenyne. The occupants, already in shock, just stood and stared. With the pair was a golden oblong box that sat in the center of the room. A sculpture of two Diathim stretching out their wings towards one another rested prominently on the lid.

"Your friends will be fine," Hextrophon reassured them. "There is yet much work for them to do, but the Force is with them!"

That was when the room erupted in ebullient exclamations and questions that the pair attempted to answer. Finally, after a hearty welcome, the Watcher inquired of the Ryloth Ark.

"This is just on loan," Cuenyne replied. "We just wanted you to see it to you since you went to so much trouble to retrieve it."

Then, as if in a dream, the Ark vanished once more. R2 trilled as C-3PO stood in amazement, for once speechless.

"As we speak, it is with the Celestials who have returned with chains stronger than beskar and sabers greater than light. A host of Valdilar follow with the Ciratu Spheres. The potent spirit of Anakin Skywalker champions the Father of Lights; his son and daughter fight alongside him, and their children beside them! They lead the spirits of all the Jedi, Defenders, and Chosen Ones against the hostile, worthless, and wicked forces. It will soon be over."

"In the meantime," Cuenyne started, "I would like to hear what happened to you two."

"Artoo-Detoo and See-Threepio… Perhaps you might want to share with us your adventures," Hextrophon invited with a mysterious smile. "I hear you met the smartest man on Earth and helped create the biggest holofilm series in history."

"I'm afraid, Master Hextrophon, that it is a rather lengthy tale…"

"I can think of no better way to pass the time," Hextrophon stated, sitting down. The light in the room grew wider and warmer. Whatever was going on outside would remain a mystery for a time, and they were glad to hear no further explosions.

"I hear that you and Artoo have become *quite* the storytellers," Cuenyne said, dialing down the sarcasm so that it was barely perceptible.

"Why, that might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me! Where should I begin?"

"At the beginning, of course!" Mistress Mnemos chided.

Everything grew quiet for the next few seconds, as if the entire galaxy were listening. *And perhaps they were,* for at this moment, though the occupants of the chamber could not see it, the Children of Wutzek lit up the dead, black voids with a flickering, pastel luminescence that grew brighter as they advanced, floating in their awful and wonderful glory as they followed in the trail of Lights. Of the things that should not be, the malignant and malevolent shrieked as they dried up into ash along with the Armies of Night and their pathetic, purulent gods who were swallowed up into nothing.

"Very well…" See-Threepio acknowledged. "Artoo, perhaps you can start us off…"

"BEEP BOOP BEEP!" chimed Artoo-Deetoo.

"A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away…"

Atlas Appendix

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
23 Mere[259]		Colonies	M-13
244Core[260]	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-6
Aar	Nijune	Outer Rim	N-5
Aargau		Core Worlds	L-10
Aargonar	Perkell	Mid Rim	Q-7
Aaricetri		Inner Rim	N-12
Aaris	Kathol	Outer Rim	M-21
Abba	Xappyh	Outer Rim	Q-3
Ab'Bshingh	Sujimis	Outer Rim	O-19
Abonshee	Fakir	Colonies	K-9
Abregado		Core Worlds	K-13
Abyss	Ash Worlds	Outer Rim	S-7
Acherontic Zone	Haruspex Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Acmara	Rago	Mid Rim	I-7
Adar	N/A	Companion Aurek	N/A
Adari	Adari	Inner Rim	M-9
Adarlon	Minos Cluster	Outer Rim	M-20
Adikaria[261]		Core Worlds	K-12
Adin	Lostar	Expansion Region	M-7
Adner	Yataga	Expansion Region	N-16
Aduba	Bheriz	Outer Rim	U-11
Adumar		Wild Space	J-6
Adumbrall	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Aenir	N/A	Aenir	N/A
Aeolus	Subterrel	Outer Rim	K-20
Aeten	N/A	Wild Space	J-6
Aeternaevum	Timeless Vigil	Apeiron	N/A
Aether	N/A	[Rogue planet][262]	N/A
Affa		Inner Rim	M-13
Agamar	Lahara	Outer Rim	M-5
Agaris	N/A	Wild Space	G-14
Agasami	Atrisian Commonwealth	Core Worlds	J-12

[259] Colloquially known as Spica and the Carousel.
[260] Previously known as Sraato.
[261] Known in ancient times as Akvarium.
[262] Currently located in the Dasha subsector, Inner Rim, L-15.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Agash	Great Agash	Expansion Region	K-15
Aggregaria		Core Worlds	L-10
Agora	Sluis	Outer Rim	M-19
Ahlenn	Javin (Yarith)	Outer Rim	J-18
Ailon		Inner Rim	N-12
Aing-Ma	Kathol (Rift)	Outer Rim	M-21
Akir	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Akkhazu Anomaly	Volcarum Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Akuria	Oplovis	Outer Rim	M-5
Alahram	Illisurevimurasi	Outer Rim	Q-4
Ala'k	Immalia	Expansion Region	K-8
Alamooine	Parmic	Outer Rim	P-18
Alarevi[263]	Gaulus	Outer Rim	S-17
Alashan		Wild Space	J-5
Albaan	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-14
Alderaan[264]	Alderaan	Core Worlds	M-10
Aldereen		Inner Rim	M-14
Aleen	Bright Jewel	Mid Rim	L-7
Aleen Minor		Inner Rim	M-13
Alfestril		Inner Rim	N-12
Algara[265]	Lambda	Mid Rim	P-15
Al-ghennis	Savareen	Outer Rim	Q-17
Alluuvia	Elrood	Outer Rim	M-19
Almania	Mortex (Almanian)	Outer Rim	S-5
Al'Moab	Nuon e Safyd	Expansion Region	P-12
Alpheridies	Farstey	Expansion Region	O-8
Alsakan[266]	Alsaka	Core Worlds	L-9
Altair	Thrasybule	Outer Rim	P-6
Altor	Zoraster	Outer Rim	U-13
Altora[267]	Dalonbian	Outer Rim	L-3
Altrus		Deep Core	L-12
Alzerki	Bri'ahl	Outer Rim	I-17
Alzoc	Sujimis	Outer Rim	P-19
Amamabarane	N/A	Companion Aurek	N/A
Amar	Airon	Inner Rim	O-10
Ambria	Airon	Inner Rim	O-10

[263] Known in ancient times as Alara.
[264] Known to the Killiks as Oroboro.
[265] Known in ancient times as Aelfgar and Dyzan.
[266] Known to the Killiks as Alsakasla.
[267] Formally known as Epsilon Erandi.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Ammut	Hormahket Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Ammuud	Corporate	Outer Rim	S-4
Amunos-Magos	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Anaxes	Azure	Core Worlds	L-9
Ando	Lambda	Mid Rim	Q-15
Andor	Albarrio	Outer Rim	K-5
Andumnos	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Angorathea	N/A	Unknown Regions	F-13
Ankh	N/A	Unknown Regions	C-11
Ankhural	N/A	Hutt Space	R-9
Ankus	Freestanding Subsector	Mid Rim	I-7
Annoo	Tharin	Outer Rim	S-8
Anoat	Javin (Anoat)	Outer Rim	K-18
Antar		Inner Rim	N-12
Antemeridias	Antemeridian	Outer Rim	R-7
Antmuel	Chopani	Outer Rim	M-3
Anura[268]	Trax	Mid Rim	Q-10
Anzat[269]	Bryx	Mid Rim	R-7
Apmictlan	Angled Space	Apeiron	N/A
Apoth	Sea of Generations	Apeiron	N/A
Appith	Desolate Harbinger	Illathurion	N/A
Apshai	Chain of Aforgomon	Apeiron	N/A
Apshaidia	Great Black Nest	Illathurion	N/A
Apterra	Islands of Iteration	Apeiron	N/A
Aquaris	Sumitra	Expansion Region	N-7
Aquilae		Colonies	N-12
Aquilaris	Sanbra	Outer Rim	O-17
Arah	Dantus	Outer Rim	J-6
Aramand	Brak	Expansion Region	O-14
Arapia	Dalchon	Outer Rim	R-18
Arborea		Core Worlds	L-9
Arbra	Bon'nyuw-Luq	Outer Rim	N-17
Arcadia		Colonies	N-10
Archae Teuthis	Brevost	Expansion Region	O-14
Archanon	Seoul	Wild Space	H-20
Arcon	Corporate	Outer Rim	S-4
Arda	Gordian Reach	Outer Rim	Q-6
Ardennia	Fath	Outer Rim	K-6

[268] Known as Coomputu during the reign of the Toad Empire.
[269] Known in ancient times as Anza'ath, Za'ath, and Zatus.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Argai	Cronese Mandate	Outer Rim	S-6
Argazda	Kanz	Outer Rim	N-4
Argoth[270]	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Argud	Ragnar Cluster (Esse)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Aridus	Narvath	Expansion Region	O-14
Arigadeen		Colonies	N-10
Arilou Vortex	Hune	Mid Rim	Q-12
Arinurian Streams	Xothic Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Arkania		Colonies	M-8
Arkanis[271]	Arkanis	Outer Rim	R-17
Arkinnea	Axion	Expansion Region	P-10
Arkuu	Xappyh	Outer Rim	Q-3
Armaugh	Maldrood	Mid Rim	R-7
Arnessk	N/A	Unknown Regions	H-5
Arorua	Sertar	Outer Rim	R-5
Arous	Maldrood	Mid Rim	R-7
Arrakad	Rigel-Hurib	Inner Rim	K-14
Arrakan[272]	Prefsbelt	Outer Rim	J-5
Arrth	Local Cluster	Companion Esk	N/A
Aruun	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Aruza	Freestanding Subsector	Expansion Region	I-14
Asation	Veragi (Gree Enclave)	Outer Rim	K-3
Ashas Ree	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-5
Asher	Sprizen	Outer Rim	N-5
Asmeru	Senex	Mid Rim	L-17
Asmeru Anomaly[273]	Senex	Mid Rim	L-17
Aspereola	The Temporal Mists	Apeiron	N/A
Asta	Astal	Outer Rim	P-17
Astra	Braxant	Outer Rim	K-3
Atata	Dantus	Outer Rim	J-6
Atheria	Kallea	Outer Rim	K-21
Athiss[274]	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-5
Atoa	Ghost Nebula	Expansion Region	P-10
Atraken	Rolion	Outer Rim	Q-7
Attahox	Hocator	Expansion Region	P-12
Aubadas	Dalnan	Outer Rim	I-19

[270] Known in ancient times as Ha'argota.
[271] Known in ancient times as Arkadia.
[272] Formally known as Sulphis.
[273] Known in ancient times as the Zemyatin Anomaly.
[274] Known in ancient times as Cathiss.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Aucturn	N/A	[Rogue planet][275]	N/A
Aur		Colonies	J-13
Aura	Ash Worlds	Outer Rim	S-6
Auratera	Vorzyd	Outer Rim	R-6
Auseil	Gulf of S'glhuo	Apeiron	N/A
Autagen	Gnossus Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Automatia	Lambda	Mid Rim	P-16
Avaloth	Ghooric Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Averam	Seswenna	Outer Rim	M-18
Avon Arret	Kallea	Outer Rim	K-21
Azratum	Volcarum Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Aztar	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Azura[276]	Oricho	Outer Rim	M-6
Babylon	Varada	Outer Rim	H-19
Baka	Izamá Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Bakstre		Core Worlds	L-9
Bal'demnic[277]	Auril	Outer Rim	R-7
Balmorra		Colonies	M-10
Banasthau		Inner Rim	O-11
Bandur	Purple Void	Unknown Regions	???
Ban'Gore	Noonian	Outer Rim	M-6
Barab	Albanin	Outer Rim	U-12
Baralou	Varada	Outer Rim	H-20
Bardo	Illisurevimurasi	Outer Rim	Q-4
Bardotta	Shasos	Colonies	J-13
Barhok	Esaga (Malicrux)	Mid Rim	R-11
Barlok	Marcol	Inner Rim	L-8
Baroonda	Calaron	Outer Rim	T-9
Baros	Dominus	Outer Rim	U-7
Bartokk	Ferra	Outer Rim	S-16
Basilisk		Core Worlds	L-9
Baskarn	Noonian	Outer Rim	M-6
Bassadiir		Inner Rim	N-12
Bastooine	Graador	Mid Rim	I-17
Basut	Dantus	Outer Rim	J-6
Bator Bai	Senex	Mid Rim	L-18
Bawtoon	Wyl	Outer Rim	S-4

[275] A living planet. Most commonly resides in Illathurion.
[276] Known in ancient times as Asur.
[277] Known in ancient times as Kon'Ami.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Baylorr	Kernunus Cluster (Fomori)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Bazarre	Cademimu	Outer Rim	M-6
Bedlam	Thusa	Mid Rim	O-7
Beheboth	Sanbra	Outer Rim	O-17
Belial	Sanbra	Outer Rim	N-17
Bellassa		Core Worlds	M-11
Belnar	Belnar	Colonies	M-9
Belphégor	Sevetta	Outer Rim	S-16
Belsavis	Bozhnee	Outer Rim	L-18
Bendone	Bosph	Outer Rim	R-3
Benja-Rihn	Sevastol	Mid Rim	Q-14
Berri		Inner Rim	N-9
Bespin	Javin (Anoat)	Outer Rim	K-18
Besspin Kaalieda	Minos Cluster	Outer Rim	M-20
Black Gate of Atar	Loch-Mot Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Black Hole of Metus	Gigas Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Black Hole of Nakat		Inner Rim	N-7
Black Hole of Quintas[278]	Kriz	Outer Rim	J-19
Blackguard		Colonies	M-13
Blenjeel	Dufilvian	Mid Rim	Q-15
Blood-Bull Belt, The	Hormahket Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Bloodstars, The	N/A	Wild Space	T-18
Bogano	Mieru'kar	Outer Rim	N-3
Bogden[279]	Bogden	Inner Rim	M-8
Boltrunia	Baxel	Outer Rim	U-11
Borleias		Colonies	K-9
Bormter	N/A	Wild Space	H-14
Bothawui	Bothan	Mid Rim	R-14
Bovo Yagen	Kailion	Expansion Region	O-13
Boz Pity	Halla	Mid Rim	S-9
Boztrok	Aparo	Outer Rim	R-3
Bracca	Lantillian	Mid Rim	P-9
Branteez	Tolonda	Outer Rim	Q-17
Branth	N/A	Wild Space	J-4
Brath Qella	Mieru'kar	Outer Rim	O-3
Brazadann	Brema	Outer Rim	M-17
Bree	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Brentaal	Bormea	Core Worlds	L-9

[278] Known to the Humans of Corona V as Durant's Black Hole.
[279] Known in ancient times as Kollen.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Bridge of the Bholes	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Brigia	Tion Hegemony	Outer Rim	T-6
Brodo Asogi[280]	Perinn	Outer Rim	J-4
Brodogon[281]	Bozhnee	Outer Rim	L-18
B'trilla	Gordian Reach	Outer Rim	Q-5
Burrow of the Barracle	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Burvix	N/A	Wild Space	P-21
Byblos		Colonies	M-12
Byss		Deep Core	K-11
Bythos	Gnossus Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Caamas		Core Worlds	M-9
Caarimon	Meridian	Outer Rim	R-7
Cadma	Centrality	Outer Rim	T-8
Caiman	Izamá Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Caltinia[282]	Senex	Mid Rim	L-17
Canida	Demmeon	Core Worlds	K-13
Canoliss	Sluis	Outer Rim	M-19
Cantros	Saijo	Outer Rim	J-20
Capella	Gordian Reach	Outer Rim	Q-6
Carosi	Nembus	Outer Rim	P-4
Carrivar	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-9
Casrach	N/A	Companion Cresh	N/A
Cataalda	Onatos	Mid Rim	R-15
Cathar	Quelii	Outer Rim	N-6
Cauldron of Sine	The Cold Sovereignty	Illathurion	N/A
Cavatura	Mayagil	Outer Rim	M-18
Celaeno	Xothic Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Celanon	D'Astan	Outer Rim	O-6
Celegia	Noori	Expansion Region	O-10
Celestium	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Centares[283]	Maldrood	Mid Rim	R-7
Cephalonia	Timeless Vigil	Apeiron	N/A
Cerea	Semagi	Mid Rim	I-16
Cezith	Clacis	Outer Rim	K-4
Ch'hodos	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-4
Chaaktil		Inner Rim	N-14

[280] Known at various points as Vomestra, Od-Di-Pa, Tum Lux O-ty, and Alata Zerka.
[281] Known in ancient times are Bordogon. Its sector was then known as the Bordogon sector.
[282] Known in Caltinian Trade Tongue as Montressor.
[283] Once known to its Zonian inhabitants as Zon.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Chabosh	Lahara	Outer Rim	M-5
Chag-Hai[284]	N/A	Companion Dorn	N/A
Chalcedon	Tashtor	Mid Rim	I-16
Champala[285]		Inner Rim	L-8
Chandrila	Bormea	Core Worlds	L-9
Charmath	Farrfin	Core Worlds	K-9
Charred Heath, The	Borderland of the Old Ones	Illathurion	N/A
Charros	Taldot	Mid Rim	R-9
Chasm of Forever[286]	N/A	Companion Grek	N/A
Cheelit	Semagi	Mid Rim	I-16
Cheku	Brevost	Expansion Region	O-15
Chenowei	Gordian Reach	Outer Rim	Q-5
Chestrashus	N/A	Wild Space	Q-3
Chiggn	Tynquay	Outer Rim	Q-4
Chiloon Rift	Chiloon Rift	Wild Space	O-3
Chiron	Ash Worlds	Outer Rim	T-7
Chlann	The Wastes	Wild Space	K-2
Chronology Clock of Ap	Time Tides	Apeiron	N/A
Chronos	Timeless Vigil	Apeiron	N/A
Chthonic Clouds, The	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Cilpar[287]		Colonies	L-13
Cimi	Izamá Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Ciratu	Immerian Outback	Expansion Region	N-14
Circarpous	Circarpous	Expansion Region	O-12
Citlik	Citlik	Expansion Region	O-14
Clak'dor	Mayagil	Outer Rim	M-18
Clantaano	Albanin	Outer Rim	U-12
Clinpf	Beehive Pollux	Colonies	M-13
Cloak of the Sith, The[288]	Abrion	Outer Rim	S-15
Coachelle Prime	Terr'skiar	Mid Rim	P-10
Coachelle Secundus	Terr'skiar	Mid Rim	P-10
Coachelle Tertius	Terr'skiar	Mid Rim	P-10
Cobal[289]	Demmeon	Core Worlds	K-13
Cocytus[290]	Dominus	Outer Rim	U-8

[284] Known in ancient times as Shaggai. Transplanted from the Desolate Harbinger of Illathurion.
[285] Known in ancient times as Campala.
[286] Moved from multiple prior locations by the Celestials.
[287] Known in ancient times as Kiilpar.
[288] Formed from the remains of the Votanis Nebula.
[289] Known in ancient times as Cobol.
[290] Known in ancient times as Mörtilspi.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Coldjen	7G	Unknown Regions	G-7
Colla		Inner Rim	N-9
Columus		Core Worlds	M-11
Conjenus	Vish	Mid Rim	N-16
Constancia		Deep Core	K-12
Corbos	Esstran	Outer Rim	Q-5
Corellia	Corellian	Core Worlds	M-11
Corlaasi	Minos Cluster	Outer Rim	M-20
Corlos	N/A	Pocket dimension	N/A
Coruscant[291]	Corusca (Coruscant)	Core Worlds	L-9
Corvax	Atrisian Commonwealth	Core Worlds	J-12
Courataine	Sertar (Mahrusha)	Outer Rim	S-5
Cov	Tandon	Mid Rim	Q-14
Cowl Crucible	Oricho	Outer Rim	M-5
Coyn	Elrood	Outer Rim	M-20
Craci	Corporate	Outer Rim	R-4
Crakull	Croke Reach	Unknown Regions	G-10
Cremlev	N/A	Companion Cresh	N/A
Critoki	Esstran	Outer Rim	Q-4
Crusis	Lambda	Mid Rim	P-16
Crytal Nest	N/A	Wild Space	H-20
Csilla	Chiss Space	Unknown Regions	F-8
Culariin	Thaere	Expansion Region	P-14
Curtain of the Eidolons	Borderland of the Old Ones	Illathurion	N/A
Cyax	N/A	Hutt Space	S-11
Cygnus	Esaga	Mid Rim	R-11
Cykranor	Ghooric Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Cytharion	The Cold Sovereignty	Illathurion	N/A
Dachat		Core Worlds	K-9
Dagānu	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Dagda	Kernunus Cluster (Danaan)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Dagobah	Sluis	Outer Rim	M-19
Dagon[292]		Colonies	N-12
Dahrtag[293]		Core Worlds	J-13
Dalron	Ariarch	Mid Rim	J-6
Daltarri	Truum	Mid Rim	P-8
D'amara	Saijo	Outer Rim	J-20

[291] Known in ancient times as Notron and Pax.
[292] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Alpha Tauri.
[293] Known in ancient times as Daltharg.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Dandrian	Belderone	Outer Rim	R-7
Dantooine	Raioballo	Outer Rim	L-4
Daria	Alchenaut	Expansion Region	L-16
Dark Twins, The	Haruspex Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Darkknell[294]	Grumani	Outer Rim	M-17
Dar'Or	Jospro	Outer Rim	R-7
Darwikia[295]		Core Worlds	M-10
Dashara	Axion	Expansion Region	P-10
Datar		Inner Rim	L-8
Dathomir	Quelii	Outer Rim	O-6
Davanna	Deadalis	Expansion Region	J-8
Davnar[296]	Kanchen	Core Worlds	K-9
Deandee		Deep Core	L-12
Decapod	Dominus	Outer Rim	U-7
Deep Dark, The	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Deir'ar	Thrasybule	Outer Rim	P-6
Delari	Corva	Outer Rim	P-4
Delfii	Minos Cluster	Outer Rim	M-20
Dellalt	Tion Hegemony	Outer Rim	T-6
Delphania	Esuain	Mid Rim	Q-7
Delphidian Cluster	Freestanding Subsector	Mid Rim	I-15
Delrakkin	Kallea	Outer Rim	K-21
Delvia	Ghost Nebula	Expansion Region	P-10
Demar	Brak	Expansion Region	O-14
Demmeon	Demmeon	Core Worlds	K-13
Demonsgate	Kathol (Rift)	Outer Rim	M-21
Demonstars, The	Haruspex Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Demophon	Demophon	Core Worlds	M-10
Demundia	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-5
Denab	Sluis	Outer Rim	M-19
Deneba	Maerdocian	Mid Rim	Q-13
Dentaria	Dentari	Expansion Region	O-8
Derosa	N/A	Companion Dorn	N/A
Desecrate Hollow, The	Hormahket Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Desevro	Tion Hegemony	Outer Rim	S-6
Desideratum[297]	Sluis	Outer Rim	M-19

[294] Known in ancient times as Knell.
[295] Known in ancient times as Darwyk.
[296] Known in ancient times as Dhuvnar.
[297] Also known as Severeem Prime.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Despoina	Sigurd's Cradle	Companion Esk	N/A
Despora	Dalonbian	Outer Rim	M-2
Destructon	Calaron	Outer Rim	T-9
Devaron	Duluur	Colonies	M-13
Diab	N/A	Wild Space	J-6
Diatia Major		Core Worlds	L-12
Dimea	Dimean	Expansion Region	P-13
Dire Sacrifice Pillars, The	Loch-Mot Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Dire Stars of the Hydras	Xothic Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Dis	Wyl	Outer Rim	S-4
Diyu[298]	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Djall	Gigas Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Djurmo	Strabin	Mid Rim	M-7
Dmyria	Cadma	Outer Rim	T-8
DNX-N1	N/A	Wild Space	N-21
Doan	Halthor	Outer Rim	M-6
Dolfirm	Brak	Expansion Region	O-14
Dom-Bradden	Lol	Outer Rim	Q-18
Dominus	Dominus	Outer Rim	U-7
Doneer'so	Fakir	Colonies	K-9
Dorca		Core Worlds	M-10
Dorin	Deadalis	Expansion Region	J-8
Dornea	Dominus	Outer Rim	U-7
Drackmar	Quelii	Outer Rim	O-6
Dracon	Atravis	Outer Rim	L-19
Drada	Halthor	Outer Rim	L-6
Dralion	Kalamith	Outer Rim	P-5
Dranconus	Trans-Nebular	Mid Rim	R-16
Drauger Pulsars	Ragnar Cluster (Vane)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Dreighton	Dantus	Outer Rim	J-6
Dreighton Nebula	Dantus	Outer Rim	J-6
Dressel	Noolian	Mid Rim	Q-13
Drexel	Lol	Outer Rim	Q-18
Drexel Minor	Khuiumin	Outer Rim	O-19
Drogheda	Teraab	Mid Rim	Q-11
Dromund[299]	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-5
Droxine	Esstran	Outer Rim	Q-5

[298] Also known as Yedar. Notorious legends of this Charnel World inspired the name of an unrelated planet in Hutt Space.
[299] Known in ancient times as Drômenregn and Drômencas.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Drukath	Borderland of the Old Ones	Illathurion	N/A
Drukh	Gla'aki Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Druug[300]	Minos Cluster	Outer Rim	M-20
Druul	Kanz	Outer Rim	M-4
Druulgotha	Thesme	Outer Rim	O-6
Dúath	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Dubrillion[301]	Myto	Outer Rim	K-3
Duinn	Kenunus Cluster (Danaan)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Duneeden	Corusca	Core Worlds	K-9
Duodel	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Dur Sabon	Morshdine	Outer Rim	O-5
Durace	N/A	Unknown Regions	H-6
Durkteel	Kastolar	Mid Rim	Q-10
Duro	Duro	Core Worlds	M-11
Duunir	Kibilini	Outer Rim	Q-17
Duzhak	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
D'vaaran[302]	N/A	[Rogue planet]	N/A
Dwartii	Nouane	Inner Rim	N-8
Ealor	Parmic	Outer Rim	P-18
Earth[303]	Fath	Outer Rim	K-6
Ebenmal	Irnaj	Mid Rim	K-17
Eberon	Mytaranor	Mid Rim	P-9
Ebra	Kesh	Mid Rim	L-6
Effogus		Core Worlds	K-9
Ehjenla	Kathol (Outback)	Outer Rim	M-21
Eiattu	Ado	Mid Rim	L-17
Eibon	Cronese Mandate	Outer Rim	S-6
Eirrauus	Quence	Outer Rim	P-18
Eitan	Haruspex Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Elamposnia	Gordian Reach	Outer Rim	Q-5
Elriss	Onatos	Mid Rim	R-15
Elom	Sertar	Outer Rim	R-5
Empress Teta	Koros	Deep Core	L-10
En-Nagaha	Hormahket Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Endex	Velcar	Outer Rim	J-5
Endor	Zuma (Moddell)	Outer Rim	H-16

[300] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Zeta Persei.
[301] Known in ancient times as Drayen.
[302] Colloquially nicknamed D'vouran or D'voran.
[303] Known in ancient times as Terra II and Londinium.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Endor Gate	Zuma (Moddell)	Outer Rim	H-16
Endregaad	Indrexu	Outer Rim	S-5
Ensolica		Core Worlds	K-10
Ensorcelled Spheres, The	Kernunus Cluster (Fomori)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Entarr	Auril	Outer Rim	R-6
Entralla[304]	Velcar	Outer Rim	K-4
Entropy's Edge	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-8
Enz		Colonies	M-9
Eokaid	Kernunus (Fomori)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Eol Sha	Corva	Outer Rim	P-3
Ephemera Minor	Esaga (Malicrux)	Mid Rim	R-11
Epidimi	Rolion	Outer Rim	Q-7
Epiphany	Sluis	Outer Rim	M-19
Equanus	Veragi	Outer Rim	K-3
Er'stacia	N/A	Wild Space	V-9
Ereesus	Kanz	Outer Rim	N-4
Eriadu	Seswenna	Outer Rim	M-18
Eridain[305]	Euphrates	Inner Rim	O-10
Erinn	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-14
Eriscot	Haserian	Mid Rim	Q-14
Ermi	Sertar	Outer Rim	R-5
Esfandia	N/A	Wild Space	I-6
Eshan	Six Sisters	Inner Rim	N-8
Esooma	Sprizen	Outer Rim	N-5
Esseles	Darpa	Core Worlds	L-9
Essowyn	Trax	Mid Rim	Q-10
Eta Vulpeculae	Hythrope	Expansion Region	M-15
Eternity Rift	The Temporal Mists	Apeiron	N/A
Ethania	Corva	Outer Rim	P-4
Euvoran Maelstrom	Borderland of the Old Ones	Illathurion	N/A
Exodeen		Colonies	M-12
Ezhmun	Loch-Mot Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Faarlsun[306]	Parthovian Cluster	Wild Space	T-4
Face of Space, The	N/A	[Rogue black hole]	N/A[307]
Fahz[308]	N/A	Wild Space	S-20
Falayalaralfali	N/A	Pocket dimension	N/A

[304] Known in ancient times as Elina and Entra.
[305] Known to the inhabitants of Cobol as Epsilon Eridani.
[306] Known in ancient times as Pochi.
[307] A living black hole. Most commonly resides in the Gla'aki Cluster of the Nihil Retreat.
[308] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Beta Aquarii.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Fale[309]	N/A	Companion Aurek	N/A
Falleen[310]	Doldur	Mid Rim	P-15
Falloria	Clacis	Outer Rim	K-4
Farfalla	Indra-su-Mar	Expansion Region	P-12
Fariance	Viis Space	Unknown Regions	E-15
Faroe Ferry	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Farrfin	Farrfin	Core Worlds	K-9
Fated Mists of Vegoia	Haruspex Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Fef	Glythe	Mid Rim	J-7
Felacat[311]	Grohl	Outer Rim	R-15
Felucia	Thanium	Outer Rim	R-6
Fenel	Demetras	Outer Rim	O-7
Fennesa		Inner Rim	K-14
Fere	Quelii	Outer Rim	O-6
Ferro	Illisurevimurasi	Outer Rim	Q-4
Fields of the Nephilim	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Filordis	Larrin	Inner Rim	N-8
Filve	Dufilvian	Mid Rim	R-15
Fiori 16	Neroid	Inner Rim	J-8
Firrerre	Zuma (Sugai)	Outer Rim	H-16
Flax	Sumitra	Expansion Region	O-7
Florn	Pakuuni	Outer Rim	T-5
Fluwhaka	Mortex	Outer Rim	R-5
Forest of the Moon	Valtaullu Rift	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Forhilnor[312]	N/A	Wild Space	T-18
Fornax	Glythe	Mid Rim	J-7
Forntay		Core Worlds	L-12
Fortaevum	Islands of Iteration	Apeiron	N/A
Fractalus[313]	N/A	Wild Space	K-2
Fray	Esaga (Malicrux)	Mid Rim	R-11
Fresia	Torranix	Core Worlds	K-10
Friazel	Abrion	Outer Rim	S-15
Frisal	Atrisian Commonwealth	Core Worlds	J-12
Frivoli	N/A	Frivoli	N/A
Frivoli Gate	Time Tides	Apeiron	N/A
Frowa	Ragnar Cluster (Vane)	Nihil Retreat	N/A

[309] Known in ancient times as Kwotar and to the Humans of Jinnorseel as Asmodeus.
[310] Known in ancent times as Fareen.
[311] Known in ancient times as Grohl.
[312] Formally known as Beta Hydri.
[313] Known to the Jaggi as Tepdi Vad Neroleil Rahcre.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
F'tral	Calaron	Outer Rim	T-9
Fusai	Zuma (Fusai)	Outer Rim	H-16
Fyodos	Tammuz	Outer Rim	U-14
G'aav'aar'oon	Vodilux	Inner Rim	K-14
Gacerian	Baroli	Expansion Region	N-15
Galaga	Great Black Nest	Illathurion	N/A
Galand	Torranix	Core Worlds	K-10
Galang	Thaere	Expansion Region	P-14
Galdar	Mieru'kar	Outer Rim	N-3
Gallinore	Hapes Cluster	Inner Rim	O-9
Galtea	Kathol	Outer Rim	M-21
Galterra[314]	Critos Nebula	Unknown Regions	H-6
Gamma	Eucer	Mid Rim	R-7
Gamoray		Inner Rim	I-13
Gamorr	Galov	Outer Rim	T-14
Gand	Shadola	Outer Rim	T-8
Gap of Yaldaba	Gnossus Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Garcornia	Ado	Mid Rim	M-17
Gargolyn	N/A	Wild Space	I-8
Gargon	Mandalore	Outer Rim	O-7
Garn[315]	Cadma	Outer Rim	T-8
Garnib	Bozhnee	Outer Rim	L-18
Gartha	Purple Void	Unknown Regions	???
Gateway of the Glooth	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Gaza	Viis Space	Unknown Regions	E-15
Geborrose	Sea of Generations	Apeiron	N/A
Gelgelar	Elrood	Outer Rim	M-20
Gellefon	Savareen	Outer Rim	Q-16
Genassa	M'shinni	Mid Rim	M-7
Gendai	N/A	Unknown Regions	F-13
Genus	Lantillian	Mid Rim	P-9
Geonosis	Arkanis	Outer Rim	R-16
Geroon	N/A	Unknown Regions	I-8
Gerres Gule	Primtara	Mid Rim	P-15
Ggof'ahm	Ash Worlds	Outer Rim	S-6
Ghawyil	Thesme	Outer Rim	O-5
Ghishi	Daimar	Mid Rim	Q-16
Gholondreine	Chitarghar	Expansion Region	K-15

[314] Known in ancient times as Terra XI.
[315] Known in ancient times as Sarn.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Gibbart	Prefsbelt	Outer Rim	K-5
Gibbela	Atrivis	Outer Rim	L-5
Gigor	Tynquay	Outer Rim	R-4
Giju	Herglic Space	Colonies	L-13
Girgoll	Kernunus Cluster (Fomori)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Glee Anselm	Jalor	Mid Rim	J-7
Glilandy	Farlax (Koornacht Cluster)	Core Worlds	K-10
Glottal	Baxel	Outer Rim	U-11
GNR-0	Kossa	Expansion Region	P-10
Gobannus	Kernunus Cluster (Danaan)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Godo	Quence	Outer Rim	O-18
Golgoroth	Borderland of the Old Ones	Illathurion	N/A
Golrath	Sanbra	Outer Rim	O-17
Goratak	Vensensor	Expansion Region	K-16
Gorm	Meerian	Outer Rim	O-6
Gorobei		Inner Rim	M-8
Goroth	Trans-Nebular	Mid Rim	R-16
Gorse[316]		Inner Rim	O-10
Gorsh	N/A	Wild Space	O-3
Gra Ploven		Colonies	N-13
Grakouine[317]	Onatos	Mid Rim	R-15
Graveyard of Time Worms	Angled Space	Apeiron	N/A
Gravityr	Loch-Mot Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Gravlex Med	Raioballo	Outer Rim	L-4
Great Ennead	Hormahket Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Gree	Veragi (Gree Enclave)	Outer Rim	L-2
Grepoa	Hadar	Mid Rim	L-18
Grizmallt		Core Worlds	L-9
Groth	Bootana Hutta	Hutt Space	S-11
Gruvia	Hilo	Expansion Region	P-13
Gryphon		Inner Rim	N-9
Gryps	Varada	Outer Rim	H-19
Guiteica	Kadok Regions	Wild Space	J-4
Gunninga Gap	Valtaullu Rift	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Gwaihul	Taldot	Mid Rim	Q-9
Had Abbadon[318]		Deep Core	L-10
Haffrin	Esstran	Outer Rim	Q-4

[316] Known in ancient times as Gorch.
[317] Known in ancient times as Grakin.
[318] Known in ancient times as Baraka.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Haides	Borderland of the Old Ones	Illathurion	N/A
Hakara	Corva	Outer Rim	P-3
Halawee	Spinward	Outer Rim	N-2
Halos	N/A	Unknown Regions	F-7
Harrandarr	Bosph	Outer Rim	Q-3
Haruun Kal	Dustig	Mid Rim	M-17
Hasari	Herglic Space	Colonies	L-13
Haunted Reaches, The	Heptad Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Hawlk Holes	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Hedammu Ring	Heptad Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Hedera	Carrion	Outer Rim	J-4
Heffrin	Arkanis	Outer Rim	R-17
Heleth	Spinward	Outer Rim	M-2
Helialis		Core Worlds	M-12
Helicia		Deep Core	L-11
Hellgate, The	Ghooric Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Hellhoop, The	Hocatar	Expansion Region	P-12
Hellios[319]	Tapani	Colonies	L-13
Hestan	Chain of Aforgomon	Apeiron	N/A
Hevel's Home	N/A	Wild Space	S-3
Hevron		Inner Rim	N-8
Hidden Gate of Apothem	Tindalos	Illathurion	N/A
Hidden Lights, The	Twilight Vigil	Illathurion	N/A
Hiit	Corporate	Outer Rim	S-3
Hirom	Saijo	Outer Rim	J-20
Hirsi	Elbaran	Mid Rim	J-17
Hjaff	Tarc Domain	Colonies	J-13
Hôbabis Quasar	Heptad Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Hoblin	Izamá Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Hodria	Dalicron	Outer Rim	K-19
Hole of Infinity	The Temporal Mists	Apeiron	N/A
Hollon	Myrkha	Inner Rim	J-14
Hologram Fun World	Phelleem	Outer Rim	S-7
Homana	Strabin	Mid Rim	M-6
Horlek'k	Purple Void	Unknown Regions	???
Horlussur	Hormahket Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Hortekai	Krenhner	Inner Rim	L-14
Hoszh Iszhir	Uoti	Core Worlds	K-9
Hoth	Javin (Anoat)	Outer Rim	K-18

[319] Known in ancient times as Cyrannis.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
H'ratth		Inner Rim	N-10
H'relac	Aparo	Outer Rim	R-3
Huk		Wild Space	J-4
Hutlar	Senex	Mid Rim	L-17
Hyabb	Krenher	Core Worlds	K-9
Hyneria	Outer Jalor	Mid Rim	I-7
Hyperbole	Sluis	Outer Rim	M-19
Hysalria	Sluis	Outer Rim	M-19
Iä	Gnossus Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Ianane	N/A	Wild Space	I-10
Iarainn	Sea of Generations	Apeiron	N/A
Iego[320]	Ash Worlds	Outer Rim	T-7
Igzis		Unknown Regions	H-7
Iirkthoss	Ghooric Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Iktotchon[321]	Narvath	Expansion Region	O-14
Ilithiya	Haruspex Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Illarreen	Herios	Outer Rim	T-16
Illna	Msst	Mid Rim	P-7
Illuiyanka	Heptad Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Illyria	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Ilum	7G	Unknown Regions	G-7
Imdaar	Dantus	Outer Rim	J-6
Immolan	Talcene	Mid Rim	Q-8
Inapus	Hormahket Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Inchich	Trax	Mid Rim	Q-10
Indika	Kernunus Cluster (Fomori)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Indix	Gla'aki Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Indrexu Spiral[322]	Multiple (Tion Cluster)	Outer Rim	S-5/S-6
Industro	Thrasybule	Outer Rim	P-6
Infinite Staircase	Islands of Iteration	Apeiron	N/A
Inguin	Ragnar Cluster (Vane)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Inysh		Core Worlds	J-12
Iotra	Suolriep (Iotran Expanse)	Outer Rim	S-8
Iphar		Inner Rim	L-14
Ipisestec	Meram	Outer Rim	O-4
Iridonia	Glythe	Mid Rim	J-7
Irkalla	N/A	Unknown Regions	I-12

[320] Known in ancient times as Maelibo.
[321] Known in ancient times as Ankhela.
[322] Known in ancient times as the Ihala Spiral.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Irudiru	N/A	Wild Space	S-4
Isen	D'Astan	Outer Rim	N-5
Ishanna	Circarpous	Expansion Region	O-12
Isis	Javin (Anoat)	Outer Rim	K-18
Iskalon	Trans-Nebular	Mid Rim	R-16
Isorropia		Deep Core	K-11
Issor	Arkanis	Outer Rim	R-17
Ithor	Ottega	Mid Rim	M-6
Ithull	Airon	Inner Rim	O-10
Ithull Swarm, The	Hormahket Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Iverti	Gigas Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Ixig	Valtaullu Rift	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Iyari	Heptad Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Iyred	Kibilini	Outer Rim	Q-17
Jaciprus		Core Worlds	M-11
Jagomir	Esstran (Jaga's Cluster)	Outer Rim	Q-5
Jaguada	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-5
Jandoon	Corva	Outer Rim	P-4
Janguine	Halthor	Outer Rim	L-6
Jankok	Bozhnee	Outer Rim	L-18
Janodral Mizar	Indrexu	Outer Rim	S-5
Janovus	Chain of Aforgomon	Apeiron	N/A
Jarnollen	Bright Jewel	Mid Rim	L-7
Jastaal	Sertar (Mahrusha)	Outer Rim	S-5
Jasterkast	Esaga (Malicrux)	Mid Rim	R-11
Jazbina	Lostar	Expansion Region	M-8
Jeareh		Colonies	M-9
Jennehem	N/A	Unknown Regions	I-11
Jennoshim	Subterrel	Outer Rim	L-20
Jentawui	Bothan	Mid Rim	R-14
Jerne	Kanz	Outer Rim	N-4
Jerrilek		Deep Core	L-10
Jiroch	Yushan	Mid Rim	K-17
Jocacea[323]	The Temporal Mists	Apeiron	N/A
Joralla	Mektrun	Mid Rim	L-17
Julsujod	Tolonda	Outer Rim	Q-17
Kaa		Colonies	N-10
Kabaira	Bajic	Outer Rim	P-17
Kabieroun	Nijune	Outer Rim	N-4

[323] Formerly located in the Unknown Regions before being moved to Apeiron.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Kabir	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Ka'Dedus	Tharin (Periphery)	Outer Rim	S-8
Kadar	Hertae	Mid Rim	Q-14
Kadril	Thanium	Outer Rim	R-6
Kaikielius[324]		Core Worlds	L-10
Kaisa	Corva	Outer Rim	P-3
Ka'jk'z	Great Black Nest	Illathurion	N/A
Kalaan	Churnis	Mid Rim	J-7
Kalaix	Atravis	Outer Rim	L-20
Kalarba	Hevvrol	Mid Rim	P-15
Kalaxon-Kalamar	Yucrales	Mid Rim	R-14
Kaldar Tertiary[325]	Chopani	Outer Rim	M-3
Kalee	N/A	Wild Space	J-4
Kalidorn	N/A	Wild Space	O-20
Kalla	Corporate	Outer Rim	S-4
Kallipt	Gnossus Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Kalsunor	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-4
Kamazot Rift	Izamá Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Kamis	Volcarum Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Karack	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-8
Kamar	N/A	Wild Space	S-4
Kamino	N/A	Extragalactic	S-15
Kanopis	Terr'skiar	Mid Rim	Q-10
Kar'a'katok[326]		Core Worlds	K-9
Karideph	Minos Cluster	Outer Rim	M-20
Karkaris	Nilgaard	Outer Rim	S-5
Karlatt		Core Worlds	K-12
Karnak Alpha[327]		Core Worlds	M-10
Karran	Rayter	Outer Rim	J-19
Karthakk	Karthakk	Outer Rim	Q-17
Kashoon	Colundra	Outer Rim	S-5
Kashyyyk	Mytaranor	Mid Rim	P-9
Katapuk	Islands of Iteration	Apeiron	N/A
Katarr	Vensori	Mid Rim	O-8
Kath	Dustig	Mid Rim	M-17
Kathol	Kathol (Rift)	Outer Rim	M-21

[324] Known in ancient times as Vahalii.
[325] Known in ancient times as Antares.
[326] Known in ancient times as Carcosa and Kar'kosa. Transplanted from the Desolate Harbinger of Illathurion.
[327] Known in ancient times as Damec.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Kathol Rift[328]	Kathol (Rift)	Outer Rim	M-21
Katurrah	Meerian	Outer Rim	O-6
Kauron	Meram	Outer Rim	O-4
Kayri	Freestanding Subsector	Expansion Region	I-15
Kelm	Esaga (Malicrux)[329]	Mid Rim	R-11
Kerest	Sluis	Outer Rim	M-19
Kerkoidia	Kira	Expansion Region	N-15
Kesh	N/A	Wild Space	U-10
Kessel	Kessel	Outer Rim	T-10
Kessel Minor	Kessel	Outer Rim	T-10
Kestavel		Colonies	K-9
Ket	Hapes Cluster	Inner Rim	O-9
Keyorin	Belderone	Outer Rim	R-6
K'gil'mnon	Great Black Nest	Illathurion	N/A
Khadaji Singularity	Corridan	Core Worlds	J-10
Khar Delba	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-5
Khituchai	Greater Plooriod	Expansion Region	M-7
Khoan	Phelleem	Outer Rim	S-7
Khorm	Halori	Mid Rim	P-8
Khuzor	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Kibn	Roche	Mid Rim	Q-8
Kidron	Elrood	Outer Rim	M-20
Kiliea	Atrisian Commonwealth	Core Worlds	J-12
Killaniri	Wornal	Mid Rim	K-17
Kilmauls	Vorzyd	Outer Rim	R-6
Kintan	N/A	Hutt Space	S-9
Kinyen	Bes Ber Bikade	Expansion Region	L-15
Kirdo	Tamarin	Outer Rim	N-19
Kiros	Ehosiq	Expansion Region	L-8
Kirtania	Nembus	Outer Rim	P-4
Kirwin	Cassander	Outer Rim	K-5
Kitel Phard[330]	Atrisian Commonwealth	Core Worlds	J-12
Kizin	Izamá Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Kkor	Garden of the Lorelei	Illathurion	N/A
Klendathu	Hune	Mid Rim	Q-12
Kloper		Inner Rim	N-9
Koboth	Kobothi Space	Outer Rim	R-3

[328] Known in ancient times as the Q'roliak Helicoid.
[329] Known to the Mogturmen of Enz as the Porasti Range.
[330] Also known as Atrisia.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Kolaador	Dalchon	Outer Rim	R-17
Kooriva		Inner Rim	M-14
Koozebane[331]	Calaron	Outer Rim	T-9
Korbin		Inner Rim	J-14
Korda		Inner Rim	O-8
Korma Berst	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Koronis	7G	Unknown Regions	G-7
Korriban[332]	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-5
Korridor	Borderland of the Old Ones	Illathurion	N/A
Korvaii	Kordu	Mid Rim	L-7
Kotaratu	Loch-Mot Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Kotchi	Vodilux	Inner Rim	K-14
Kothlis	Bothan	Mid Rim	R-14
Kovahn		Colonies	M-9
Krake's Planet	Demetras	Outer Rim	P-7
Krann	Brevost	Expansion Region	O-15
Krant	Bothan	Mid Rim	R-14
Krayiss	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-5
Kreee'Ark	Purple Void	Unknown Regions	???
Krevas	Antemeridian	Outer Rim	R-7
Kriekaal	N/A	Wild Space	J-14
Krii	N/A	Companion Dorn	N/A
Krin Koda[333]	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-18
Kr'llyand	Garden of the Lorelei	Illathurion	N/A
Kro Var		Unknown Regions	F-16
Krozurbia	Shadola	Outer Rim	U-8
Krull[334]	Atravis	Outer Rim	L-19
Kruos	N/A	Companion Dorn	N/A
Kruskan	Colundra	Outer Rim	S-5
Ktath'atn	Chopani	Outer Rim	M-4
Ktil	Ktilac Regions	Inner Rim	N-9
Ktynga	Xothic Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Kubindi	Calaron	Outer Rim	T-9
Kuk'k'ur'kan	Izamá Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Kukuth	Gigas Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Kulshedër	Gigas Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A

[331] Also known as Crouton.
[332] Known esoterically as Moraband and to the Tionese as Pesegam.
[333] Known in ancient times as New Tempest and Tarin.
[334] Known in ancient times as Q'rul.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Kuna's Eye	Zuma (Moddell)	Outer Rim	H-16
Kuna's Fist	Zuma (Moddell)	Outer Rim	H-16
Kuna's Horn	Zuma (Moddell)	Outer Rim	H-16
Kuna's Tail	Zuma (Moddell)	Outer Rim	H-16
Kuna's Tooth	Zuma (Moddell)	Outer Rim	H-16
Kuras	Elrood	Outer Rim	M-19
Kushibah	Gordian Reach	Outer Rim	P-5
Kvasidreyra	Ragnar Cluster (Vane)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Kyabetsu[335]		Inner Rim	K-14
KyLessia	Bes Ber Bikade	Expansion Region	L-15
Kyoloria	Xappyh	Outer Rim	Q-3
Laar	Juvex	Mid Rim	L-17
Laboi	Suolriep	Outer Rim	S-8
La'drach	Uoti	Core Worlds	K-9
Lae Clottis	Esstran	Outer Rim	Q-5
Lafra	Wyl	Outer Rim	R-4
Lagoon of Lost and Lonely	Borderland of the Old Ones	Illathurion	N/A
Lahsbane[336]	Onatos	Mid Rim	R-15
Lakra	N/A	Wild Space	I-6
Lamaredd	N/A	Wild Space	S-18
Lan Barell	Hook Nebula	Outer Rim	O-18
Langhesa	Meram	Outer Rim	P-4
Lankor	Lankor	Core Worlds	K-10
Lanth	Desolate Harbinger	Illathurion	N/A
Lao-mon[337]	N/A	Unknown Regions	I-9
Lapool	Viis Space	Unknown Regions	E-15
Latarz	Limbala	Core Worlds	K-12
Lazerian	Kira	Expansion Region	N-15
Lazul	Lambda	Mid Rim	P-16
Legaevum	Timeless Vigil	Apeiron	N/A
Lekua	Centrality	Outer Rim	T-8
Lenocia	Chorlian	Outer Rim	S-4
Lerct	Prackla	Expansion Region	O-8
Leria Kerlsil[338]		Core Worlds	M-10
Leritor	Yucrales	Mid Rim	Q-15
Leshan		Core Worlds	K-12

[335] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Delta Gorno.
[336] Known in ancient times as Bane.
[337] Also known as Sh'shuun.
[338] Known in ancient times as Stokoryce.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Lesser Ogdoad	Hormahket Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Lettow		Core Worlds	M-11
Limbala	Limbala	Core Worlds	K-12
Linholm	Arkanis	Outer Rim	R-16
Liok	Ciutric	Outer Rim	N-5
Lira San	Lirasan Nebula	Wild Space	P-20
Llugus	Kernunus Cluster (Danaan)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Loch Lamiae	Hormahket Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Lokke's Web	Ragnar Cluster (Esse)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Lol[339]	Lol	Outer Rim	Q-18
Lonatro	Veragi (Gree Enclave)	Outer Rim	L-3
Lontar		Colonies	J-9
Lontellae	Relgim	Outer Rim	L-4
Lophai	Garden of the Lorelei	Illathurion	N/A
Lorrd	Kanz	Outer Rim	N-4
Lorta	Gendius	Mid Rim	J-17
Loryx	Purple Void	Unknown Regions	???
Lothal[340]	Dominus (Lothal)	Outer Rim	U-7
Lotho Minor	Wazta	Outer Rim	I-17
Low'n	Romintine	Mid Rim	Q-8
Lucazec[341]	Nuiri	Outer Rim	Q-6
Luka		Inner Rim	O-8
Lur	Aparo	Outer Rim	R-4
Luton	Lifh	Mid Rim	R-8
Lutrillia	Javin (Yarith)	Outer Rim	J-18
Lwhekk	Ssi-Ruuvi Cluster	Unknown Regions	C-16
Lylat	Terr'skiar	Mid Rim	P-10
Lyme	Jospro	Outer Rim	R-7
Ma'alkerr	Rago	Mid Rim	I-7
Mackar	Hewett	Mid Rim	M-6
Maelich	N/A	Companion Cresh	N/A
Magataran Maelstrom		Inner Rim	N-7
Magnetic Sea	Demmeon	Core Worlds	K-13
Mahrusha	Sertar (Mahrusha)	Outer Rim	S-5
Maires	Hapes Cluster	Inner Rim	O-9
Makatak[342]	Rakatan Archipelago	Unknown Regions	H-6

[339] Known in ancient times as Loligo.
[340] Known in ancient times as Sicemon.
[341] Known to the Tionese as Far Thanium.
[342] Listed on most starcharts as UR-2212-GR.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Makeb	Aida	Mid Rim	Q-13
Makem Te	Nilgaard	Outer Rim	S-5
Mala[343]	Atravis	Outer Rim	L-19
Malachor	Chorlian	Outer Rim	S-4
Maladi	Maladi	Expansion Region	O-12
Malador	Juvex	Mid Rim	L-17
Malagarr	N/A	Wild Space	V-8
Malanose	Veragi (Gree Enclave)	Outer Rim	K-2
Malastare	Dustig	Mid Rim	N-16
Malicrux Nebula	Esaga (Malicrux)	Mid Rim	R-11
Malrev	Thrasybule	Outer Rim	P-6
Manaan		Inner Rim	O-11
Manda	Manda	Mid Rim	R-15
Mandalah[344]	Corporate	Outer Rim	S-3
Mandalore[345]	Mandalore	Outer Rim	O-7
Mandragora	Nuiri	Outer Rim	Q-6
Mantus	Haruspex Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Máragain	Kernunus Cluster (Danaan)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Marcol Void	Kathol (Outback)	Outer Rim	M-21
Mard	Ghost Nebula	Expansion Region	P-10
Maridun	Rolion	Outer Rim	Q-6
Markbee's Star	Atrivis	Outer Rim	L-5
Mar'kinga Banda	Doldur	Mid Rim	P-15
Marrowstar, The	Kernunus Cluster (Fomori)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Marshellon	Vodilux	Inner Rim	K-14
Matamagnus	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Mataou	Javin (Anoat)	Outer Rim	K-18
Maw Cluster	Kessel	Outer Rim	T-10
Mazon	M/A	Companion Dorn	N/A
Medar	N/A	Companion Dorn	N/A
Meeg	Fellwe	Expansion Region	L-8
Mekkar	N/A	Wild Space	I-7
Melmac	N/A	Companion Dorn	N/A
Mengjini	Bright Jewel	Mid Rim	L-7
Mentorn	Dalonbian	Outer Rim	L-3
Mephitis		Colonies	J-13

[343] Known in ancient times as Ossia.
[344] Known in ancient times as Shrob.
[345] Known in ancient times as Tal'tar.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Meridian[346]	Meridian	Outer Rim	R-7
Merj	Quelii	Outer Rim	O-6
Merys	Aparo	Outer Rim	R-3
Meschooine[347]	Prefsbelt	Outer Rim	K-6
Metellos	Corusca	Core Worlds	K-10
Metheus	Vapour Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Mezzallmech	Ghooric Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Mika	Arkanis	Outer Rim	R-17
Miko	Esaga	Mid Rim	Q-11
Mileva	Maldrood	Mid Rim	R-7
Millinar	Hapes Cluster	Inner Rim	O-9
Milola	N/A	Unknown Regions	F-13
Mima	D'Aelgoth	Mid Rim	L-17
Minbar[348]	Hakartha	Expansion Region	K-16
Mindor		Inner Rim	M-8
Minotaur	Minos Cluster	Outer Rim	M-20
Mirial	Illisurevimurasi	Outer Rim	Q-4
Mlok	N/A	Companion Forn	N/A
Moa	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Mohaun Los	Islands of Iteration	Apeiron	N/A
Molcom	Dominus	Outer Rim	U-7
Moltok	Atrivis	Outer Rim	L-5
Mon Calamari	Calamari	Outer Rim	U-6
Monastery	Haserian	Mid Rim	Q-14
Mondoshedda		Deep Core	L-10
Mondreux[349]	Hythrope	Expansion Region	M-15
Mongdul	Yminis	Outer Rim	S-14
Mongo	N/A	[Rogue planet][350]	N/A
Monor	Doldur	Mid Rim	P-15
Mooga	Perkell	Mid Rim	Q-7
Moorjhone	Jospro	Outer Rim	R-7
Morda	Tragan Cluster	Outer Rim	N-5
Morellia	Morellian Commonwealth	Wild Space	S-3
Morgania	Yminis	Outer Rim	S-14
Morganthus		Deep Core	M-11
Morseer	Quelii	Outer Rim	O-6

[346] Known to the Humans of Terra II as the Blue Sun system.
[347] Known in ancient times as New Cheyenne and Chayooine.
[348] Formally known as Chi Draconis.
[349] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Delta Vulpeculae.
[350] Known in ancient times as Arboria. Believed to currently reside in the Unknown Regions, E-8.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Morta	Timeless Vigil	Apeiron	N/A
Moshaw[351]	Seswenna	Outer Rim	M-18
Mrisst	Fakir	Colonies	K-9
Mrlsst	Tapani	Colonies	L-13
Mruun	Obtrexta	Outer Rim	K-4
Mthura	N/A	Corundum	N/A
Mu-Ab	N/A	Companion Dorn	N/A
Mugaar	Bruanii	Mid Rim	K-18
Mugg Fallow[352]	N/A	Unknown Regions	B-10
Mulita	N/A	Wild Space	H-19
Munlali Mafir	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-5
Munto Codru	Pakuuni	Outer Rim	T-6
Murakam		Deep Core	M-11
Murrg		Core Worlds	M-12
Mustafar	Atravis	Outer Rim	L-19
Muunilinst	Obtrexta	Outer Rim	K-4
Muzara	Trestis	Expansion Region	K-8
Mygeeto[353]	Albanin	Outer Rim	K-5
Mykän[354]		Colonies	M-9
Mynchepop	Viis Space	Unknown Regions	E-15
Myrkr[355]		Inner Rim	N-7
MZX32905[356]	Kanz	Outer Rim	N-4
Naboo[357]	Chommell	Mid Rim	O-17
Nagi[358]	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Nahaz Erdu		Deep Core	???
Nahsu Minor	Ktilac Regions	Inner Rim	N-9
Najarka	Rayter	Outer Rim	J-19
Najiba	Arkanis	Outer Rim	R-17
Nakrikal Singularity[359]	Grumani	Outer Rim	N-17
Nal Hutta		Hutt Space	S-12
Nalrith	Rseik	Outer Rim	N-20
Nalyd	Tharin	Outer Rim	S-7
Nam Chorios	Meridian	Outer Rim	R-6

[351] Known to the Humans of Corona V as the Cat's Eye Black Hole.
[352] Known in ancient times as Mortigan.
[353] Known in ancient times as Myggoth. Transplanted from the Desolate Harbinger of Illathurion.
[354] Contains the moons of Myzar.
[355] Known in ancient times as Mucuairt and Mukura.
[356] Known in ancient times as Lisko.
[357] Known in ancient times as Seth.
[358] Known in ancient times as Teru-Mitsu and N'kai.
[359] Known to the Humans of Corona V as the Vanov Tunnel.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Nam Priax	Nilgaard	Outer Rim	S-5
Nam'ta[360]	Atrivis	Outer Rim	L-5
Nanta Dik	9G	Unknown Regions	G-9
Nanth'ri	Kurost	Mid Rim	Q-12
Naos	N/A	Wild Space	S-18
Naplousea	Tynquay	Outer Rim	R-4
Narkad	Greater Plooriod[361]	Expansion Region	M-7
Nars	Senex	Mid Rim	L-17
Nascosto[362]	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Nasika	Hadar	Mid Rim	L-18
Nathas	Questal	Core Worlds	J-12
Nathema[363]	Chorlian	Outer Rim	S-4
Nazzri	Lantillian	Mid Rim	P-9
Near Pando[364]	N/A	Hutt Space	S-14
Nebali	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-6
Nebula Forso	Meram	Outer Rim	P-4
Necr'ygor	Chommell	Mid Rim	O-16
Nectaroon		Inner Rim	N-13
Nedij	Samix	Outer Rim	Q-19
Neelabi	Kibilini	Outer Rim	Q-17
Neimoidia		Colonies	M-10
Nelvaan	Savareen	Outer Rim	Q-16
Neona	Tapani	Colonies	L-13
Nephil	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Nessem	Lostar	Expansion Region	M-8
Nest of the Ythill Queens	Great Black Nest	Illathurion	N/A
Nestor	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Neutra	Oeiros	Expansion Region	P-10
New Corona	N/A	Companion Aurek	N/A
New Syra	Kira	Expansion Region	N-16
New Veldt	Chommell	Mid Rim	O-17
Nharqis'l	Veragi	Outer Rim	K-2
Nicht Ka	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-5
Nilash	Grumani	Outer Rim	M-17
Nilrebmah	Dentari	Expansion Region	O-8
Nimp		Core Worlds	K-13

[360] Known in ancient times as Nam'coh.
[361] Known to the Humans of Sol as the Pleaides Cluster.
[362] Formally known as Smilax.
[363] Known in ancient times as Medriaas.
[364] Known in ancient times as Malabar.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Ninzam	Ryndellian	Mid Rim	P-17
Nirn	Twilight Vigil	Illathurion	N/A
Nivek	Citlik	Expansion Region	O-14
Noe'ha'on	Piryn Shar	Expansion Region	K-16
Noori	Noori	Expansion Region	O-10
Norcia	Haruspex Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Nordra		Inner Rim	N-14
Northus	Ragnar Cluster (Vane)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Nova of Madagon		Core Worlds	L-13
Nubia	Corellian	Core Worlds	M-11
Nuhatu		Deep Core	K-12
Null	Trans-Vulta	Mid Rim	N-7
Nyny	Ash Worlds	Outer Rim	T-7
Nyssa	Tapani	Colonies	L-13
N'zoth[365]	Farlax (Koornacht Cluster)	Core Worlds	K-10
Obroa-skai		Inner Rim	N-8
Oceans of Egustus	Ghooric Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Ocsin	Corporate	Outer Rim	S-3
Odacer-Faustin	Esstran	Outer Rim	Q-5
Odju-Fyf	The Temporal Mists	Apeiron	N/A
Odryn	Noonian	Outer Rim	N-7
Ogden Minor	Maerdocian	Mid Rim	Q-12
Ogem	D'Aelgoth	Mid Rim	L-17
Ohnahmi	N/A	Wild Space	I-6
Okfil	Albarrio	Outer Rim	K-5
Old Barag	Epsi Collective	Expansion Region	M-15
Old Celeg	N/A	Companion Cresh	N/A
Ollam	Corporate	Outer Rim	R-3
Omelos	Chorlian	Outer Rim	S-4
Omicron Dawn	Valtaullu Rift	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Omiddelon	Halla	Mid Rim	S-9
Omnaevum	Sea of Generations	Apeiron	N/A
Onanna	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Onatos	Onatos	Mid Rim	R-15
Onderon	Japrael[366]	Inner Rim	O-9
Ongus	Kernunus Cluster (Danaan)	Nihil Retreat	N/A

[365] Known in ancient times as New Zoth and N'Xoth. Transplanted from the Desolate Harbinger of Illathurion.
[366] Located within the Stenness Node, Before being pulled into a new orbit during the War of Temporal Planes.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Oniboshi	Atravis	Outer Rim	L-19
Oon Tien	Kathol	Outer Rim	M-21
Óôrin	Ragnar Cluster (Esse)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Ootoola	Morshdine	Outer Rim	O-5
Oozultharoum[367]	Ghooric Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Ophideraan[368]		Colonies	K-13
Orax	Subterrel	Outer Rim	L-20
Orbalwyne	Wyl	Outer Rim	S-4
Ord Cestus[369]	D'Astan	Outer Rim	O-6
Ord Frix	Sepan	Expansion Region	P-13
Ord Mantell	Bright Jewel	Mid Rim	L-7
Ord Mynock	Prefsbelt	Outer Rim	K-6
Ord Radama	Esstran	Outer Rim	Q-5
Ord Vaxal	Callia	Inner Rim	N-13
Ord Zeuol	Vilonis	Mid Rim	O-16
Ordo	Mandalore	Outer Rim	O-7
Orebian Nebula		Inner Rim	K-14
O'reen	N/A	Unknown Regions	H-13
Orgus[370]	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Oricon	Corva	Outer Rim	P-3
Orixon Nebula	Phelleem	Outer Rim	S-7
Orooturoo	Farlax	Core Worlds	K-10
Orranana	Cadma	Outer Rim	T-8
Orryxia	Seswenna	Outer Rim	M-18
Orto	Sluis	Outer Rim	M-19
Oseon[371]	Centrality	Outer Rim	T-8
Osiris	Fath	Outer Rim	K-6
Osseria[372]	Sprizen	Outer Rim	O-5
Osseriton	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-9
Ossus	Auril	Outer Rim	R-6
Ota	Mytaranor	Mid Rim	Q-10
Otavon	Hollan	Mid Rim	M-7
Otesánek	Great Agash	Expansion Region	K-15
Othala	N/A	Companion Cresh	N/A
Othuum	Borderland of the Old Ones	Illathurion	N/A

[367] Colloquially referred to as Kooroo.
[368] Known in ancient times as Ophuchi.
[369] Known in ancient times as Dashooline and Cestus.
[370] Also known as Quor'toth.
[371] Known in ancient times as Vorsuul.
[372] Colloquially known as the Keeper's World.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Ourane	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Outer Azathi	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Ovion		Inner Rim	L-14
Ozanek	Izamá Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Oznek	Cademimu	Outer Rim	M-6
Pa Tho		Inner Rim	K-14
Paecia	Quelii	Outer Rim	O-6
Paigu	Vorzyd	Outer Rim	R-6
Pak'ma	Antemeridian	Outer Rim	R-7
Pakuuni	Pakuuni	Outer Rim	T-6
Paladez	Iseno	Inner Rim	N-13
Palaven	Apien Crest	Companion Esk	N/A
Palme du Tigre	Arc d'Stot	Expansion Region	K-15
Pamorjal	Immerian Outback	Expansion Region	N-14
Panatha	Pacanth Reach	Outer Rim	H-16
Panna	Cronese Mandate	Outer Rim	S-6
Pantolomin	Dolomar	Core Worlds	K-9
Pantora	Sujimis	Outer Rim	P-19
Papio	Ojoster	Outer Rim	N-7
Paradeen	Fath	Outer Rim	K-6
Paradise[373]	Airam	Outer Rim	M-20
Paragara	Carrion	Outer Rim	J-4
Patitite Pattuna	Bright Jewel	Mid Rim	L-7
Patrolia		Inner Rim	L-14
Paulking	Centrality	Outer Rim	U-8
P'Chora	Purple Void	Unknown Regions	???
Peekoine		Colonies	M-9
Pelagon	Tapani	Colonies	L-13
Pelgrin	Pelgrin	Outer Rim	R-17
Pellastrallas	Agarix	Mid Rim	K-18
Pellkadarr	Tashtor	Mid Rim	J-16
Pendalanor	Kriz	Outer Rim	K-19
Pendar	N/A	Pendar	N/A
Pendar Vortex	N/A	Companion Aurek	N/A
Penegelan		Inner Rim	L-14
Perdide[374]	Chain of Aforgomon	Apeiron	N/A
Perilix		Colonies	L-9
Perma		Core Worlds	M-11

[373] Known in ancient times as Phesoj.
[374] Formerly located in the Arc d'Stot sector of the Mid Rim before moving to Apeiron.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Pfertiuin	Abrion	Outer Rim	S-15
Phaaze	Rseik	Outer Rim	M-20
Phaegon[375]	Grumani	Outer Rim	N-17
Phainon	N/A	Companion Dorn	N/A
Phandiom	Gla'aki Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Phantom Stars, The	Volcarum Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Phatrong	Thrasybule	Outer Rim	P-6
Phaylenn	Javin (Yarith)	Outer Rim	J-18
Pho Ph'eah	Kalamith	Outer Rim	P-5
Phoenix Asteroids	D'Astan	Outer Rim	N-5
Phorose		Colonies	M-13
Phosphura Belt Nebula	Atravis	Outer Rim	L-20
Piri	Kallea	Outer Rim	K-21
Pinurquia	Rolion	Outer Rim	Q-7
Pitrillistia	Mieru'kar	Outer Rim	O-3
Pkunkhun[376]		Core Worlds	K-12
Plagen	Kira	Expansion Region	N-16
Ploo	Ploo	Expansion Region	N-7
Plooriod	Ploo	Expansion Region	N-7
Plunder Moon	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-8
Poictesme	N/A	Companion Dorn	N/A
Polis Massa	Subterrel	Outer Rim	K-20
Pollillus	Vannell	Core Worlds	J-10
Polus	Oricho	Outer Rim	M-6
Porpor	Grohl	Outer Rim	S-16
Port Evokk	Senex	Mid Rim	L-18
Portax	Corporate	Outer Rim	S-3
Povanaria	Gordian Reach	Outer Rim	P-6
Prakith		Deep Core	K-10
Prazhi	Cyrillian Protectorate	Expansion Region	O-12
Premont[377]	N/A	Unknown Regions	H-4
Pria		Core Worlds	M-10
Priplanus	Halm	Mid Rim	J-16
Prishardia	Antemeridian	Outer Rim	R-7
Prison of the Dark Ones	Xothic Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Prison of the Titans	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Procion		Core Worlds	M-12

[375] Known in ancient times as Phaebon.
[376] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Gamma Krueger.
[377] Known in ancient times as Turagranon.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Prolifera	Corosi	Outer Rim	N-6
Proteus	Elrood	Outer Rim	M-20
Protobranch		Core Worlds	J-13
Protofane	Gnossus Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Pthon	Gnossus Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Psychon	Dalchon	Outer Rim	R-17
Pugnara	Ploo	Expansion Region	N-7
Pursin	Atravis	Outer Rim	L-19
Puutakka	Islands of Iteration	Apeiron	N/A
Qalydon	Sertar	Outer Rim	R-5
Qiilura	Qiilura	Mid Rim	L-7
Qixoni Nebula		Colonies	K-13
Qoribu		Unknown Regions	H-7
Quadrant Seven	Barsa	Mid Rim	J-6
Quaron	Mezeg	Mid Rim	N-7
Quasti	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-5
Queel	Doldur	Mid Rim	P-15
Quenk	Corusca	Core Worlds	L-9
Quermia	Nilgaard	Outer Rim	S-5
Questal[378]	Questal	Core Worlds	J-12
Quethold	N/A	Unknown Regions	I-5
Quintarad, The[379]	Void of Aogros	Wild Space	H-18
Qujaga	Gradilis	Wild Space	I-5
Quockra	Minos Cluster	Outer Rim	M-20
Qu'ut	Subterrel	Outer Rim	K-20
Rafa[380]	Centrality	Outer Rim	T-8
Rafa Minor	Corporate	Outer Rim	S-4
Ragna	Daimar	Outer Rim	Q-16
Ragoon		Core Worlds	K-9
Rainboh	Hapes Cluster	Inner Rim	O-9
Rakaa		Core Worlds	J-12
Rakata Prime	Tempered Wastes	Unknown Regions	G-11
Rakrir	Kwymar	Outer Rim	Q-4
Rakshar[381]	N/A	Unknown Regions	E-6
Ramoa	Sprizen	Outer Rim	N-5
Ramor	Mieru'kar	Outer Rim	N-3

[378] Known in ancient times as Quetzel.
[379] Formed by the Celestials from the Five Pulsars of the Unknown Regions.
[380] Known in ancient times as Sharu.
[381] Also known as Draenor.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Randorn	Belderone	Outer Rim	Q-6
Ranroon	Mortex	Outer Rim	R-5
Rantoon	Viis Space	Unknown Regions	E-15
Rath	Haruspex Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Rathalay	Taldot	Mid Rim	R-9
Rattatak	Trilon	Outer Rim	H-16
Rauggoth	Timeless Vigil	Apeiron	N/A
Ravaath	Pacanth Reach	Outer Rim	H-16
Raxus Prime	Tion Hegemony	Outer Rim	S-5
Recopia		Core Worlds	M-11
Reg	Demmeon	Core Worlds	K-13
Regil	Xappyh	Outer Rim	Q-3
Region of Evil Spirits	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Regulan	Albanin	Outer Rim	U-12
Reibrin	Suolriep (Ansuroer)	Outer Rim	S-8
Reigalius	Yucrales	Mid Rim	Q-15
Rekkiad	Chorlian	Outer Rim	S-4
Relkass	Saijo	Outer Rim	K-20
Rellnas	Har Worlds	Expansion Region	J-16
Remulak	Montitian Grant	Expansion Region	J-15
Rendili		Core Worlds	M-11
Rentaur	Viis Space	Unknown Regions	E-15
Resh 9376	Nuiri	Outer Rim	Q-6
Reticul[382]		Colonies	L-9
Revyia	Veragi	Outer Rim	L-2
Reytha[383]	Harron	Expansion Region	O-12
Rezhef	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Rhador	Oricho	Outer Rim	M-6
Rhamsis Callo	Danjar	Outer Rim	N-19
Rhand[384]	Valtaullu Rift	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Rhelg	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-5
Rhen Var	Thanium	Outer Rim	R-6
Rhinnal	Darpa	Core Worlds	L-9
Riflor	Narrant	Mid Rim	J-16
Rigel	Bheriz	Outer Rim	U-11
Rigeria	Dalqan	Expansion Region	M-7
Righull Constellation	Ragnar Cluster (Esse)	Nihil Retreat	N/A

[382] Known to the Humans of Terra I as Zeta Reticuli.
[383] Known in ancient times as Retha.
[384] Known in ancient times as Rhandir, Angrhand, Randayn.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Rimk	Chorlian	Outer Rim	S-4
Rindia	Nembus	Outer Rim	P-4
Ring of Yig	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Rinn	Baxel	Outer Rim	U-12
Rion	Kessel	Outer Rim	T-10
Rishi	Abrion	Outer Rim	S-15
R'khemas		Inner Rim	N-13
Roche	Roche	Mid Rim	Q-8
Rodia	Savareen	Outer Rim	R-16
Rodis	Zuma (Sugai)	Outer Rim	H-16
Rogis	Viis Space	Unknown Regions	E-15
Romin	Romintine	Mid Rim	Q-8
Ronosi	Corosi	Outer Rim	N-6
Ronyards		Inner Rim	N-13
Roon	Abrion	Outer Rim	S-15
Roona	Ber Ber Bikade	Expansion Region	L-15
Ropagi	Kira	Expansion Region	N-16
Rordak	Pelgrin	Outer Rim	R-17
Roundtree		Inner Rim	M-14
Ruggel	Rolion	Outer Rim	Q-6
Rumaine	N/A	Wild Space	K-21
Ruu	N/A	Deep Core	J-11
Ruuria	Xappyh	Outer Rim	Q-3
Ruusan	Teraab	Mid Rim	P-11
Rwook	N/A	Wild Space	I-6
Rydar	Antemeridian	Outer Rim	R-7
Rylos	Palamut	Expansion Region	N-13
Ryloth	Gaulus	Outer Rim	R-17
Sacorria	Corellian	Core Worlds	M-11
Sadastor	Gla'aki Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Sagar		Inner Rim	N-13
Sagar Gate		Inner Rim	N-13
Sagma			
Saheelindeel	Tion Hegemony	Outer Rim	S-6
Sainte-Evanëflore		Core Worlds	L-12
Saki	N/A	Hutt Space	S-11
Sakuub	Pelgrin	Outer Rim	R-18
Samarra		Deep Core	L-11
Sanbra	Sanbra	Outer Rim	O-17
Sanyassa	Zuma (Moddell)	Outer Rim	H-16
Sanza	Sloo	Mid Rim	P-14

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Saqqar	N/A	Hutt Space	T-11
Sargas	Viis Space	Unknown Regions	E-15
Sarka	Sarka	Mid Rim	Q-8
Sarm	Utegetu Nebula	Wild Space	I-8
Sarrelon	Brevost	Expansion Region	O-15
Sarrish	Vensensor	Expansion Region	K-16
Sarucene	Desolate Harbinger	Illathurion	N/A
Sathiemon	Illisurevimurasi	Outer Rim	Q-4
Satio	Spinward	Outer Rim	N-2
Savareen[385]	Savareen	Outer Rim	Q-16
Scalar	Kasserine	Core Worlds	M-12
Schinga Stairs	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Scillal	Centrality	Outer Rim	T-8
Sea of Kurbant	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Sea of Pleasure	Ghooric Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Sea of Serpents	Izamá Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Sea of Sss'haa	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Sebaddon Black Hole	Freestanding Subsector	Mid Rim	Q-11
Sebiris	Kathol	Outer Rim	M-21
Secret Gate of Kulsu, The	Gigas Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Secundus Ando	Lambda	Mid Rim	Q-15
Sedonia	Tamarin	Outer Rim	N-19
Sedri	Tharin (Periphery)	Outer Rim	S-8
Seelos	Kwymar	Outer Rim	Q-4
Séhal	Ash Worlds	Outer Rim	S-7
Seidhkona	N/A	Wild Space	T-5
Seikosha	Nembus	Outer Rim	P-4
Séléann	Torranix	Core Worlds	K-10
Senaar	Demetras	Outer Rim	O-7
Seoul	N/A	Wild Space	H-20
Septevorres	Antemeridian	Outer Rim	R-7
Serenno	D'Astan	Outer Rim	P-5
Serepentis	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-5
Seretti	Clacis	Outer Rim	K-4
Serianan	N/A	Wild Space	P-2
Sern Prime	Sern	Colonies	L-13
Sernpidal	Dalonbian	Outer Rim	L-3
Serob		Core Worlds	K-12
Serpine	Illisurevimurasi	Outer Rim	Q-4

[385] Known in ancient times as Pnakotus.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Sesharrim	Agarix	Mid Rim	K-17
Sesid	Corva	Outer Rim	P-4
Sevarcos	Tamarin	Outer Rim	N-19
Seventh Nebula of Galactus	Perinn	Outer Rim	J-4
Sevetta	Sevetta	Outer Rim	T-16
Seylott	Sarin	Outer Rim	P-18
Seymarti		Colonies	M-13
Seyugi		Core Worlds	M-11
Sgol'lek	Lahara	Outer Rim	M-5
Shadrapa	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Shaphast		Core Worlds	K-13
Shar'Ack	Atrivis	Outer Rim	L-5
Shatuun	Kathol (Outback)	Outer Rim	M-21
Shaum Hii	Tragan Cluster	Outer Rim	N-5
Shawken		Core Worlds	L-9
Shaymore	Immerian Outback	Expansion Region	N-14
Shi'kar Straits	Nembus	Outer Rim	P-4
Shikitari	N/A	Unknown Regions	F-15
Shili	Ehosiq	Expansion Region	L-8
Shinbone	Instrop	Wild Space	T-17
Shingra	Sanbra	Outer Rim	O-17
Shira	Quelii	Outer Rim	O-6
Shiva[386]	Jahilid Drift	Wild Space	L-21
Shogun	Quence	Outer Rim	O-18
Shola	Tammuz	Outer Rim	U-14
Shoon	Senex	Mid Rim	L-18
Shumath-Ghun	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Shusugaunt	Raioballo	Outer Rim	L-4
Sibilaar	Bozhnee	Outer Rim	L-18
Sidamyr Taroft	Sea of Generations	Apeiron	N/A
Sigil	Chorlian	Outer Rim	S-4
Sikurd	Tynquay	Outer Rim	Q-4
Sil'Lume	Seitia	Outer Rim	K-19
Silan Wormhole	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Silent Sea of Silenus, The	Gigas Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Simento-Threk	Meram	Outer Rim	O-4
Simocadia[387]		Inner Rim	J-13

[386] Known in ancient times as the Urthha system, until its namesake world was drawn into Illathurion.
[387] Known in ancient times as Ardana.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Sipsk	Kanz	Outer Rim	N-4
Sirpar[388]	Arkanis	Outer Rim	R-17
Sisk	Calaron	Outer Rim	U-9
Sixela	Thuris	Outer Rim	P-18
Skafrax		Inner Rim	J-13
Skaith	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-9
Skella	Clacis	Outer Rim	K-4
Skor	Airam	Outer Rim	M-20
Skustell	Tarabba	Outer Rim	N-19
Skye	Varada	Outer Rim	H-19
Sljee	Ehosiq	Expansion Region	M-8
Sluis Van	Sluis	Outer Rim	M-19
Sluudren	Chorlian	Outer Rim	S-4
Smarteel	N/A	Wild Space	U-14
Sneeve	Kastolar	Mid Rim	Q-10
Sobrahem	Kastolar	Mid Rim	R-10
Socorro	Kibilini	Outer Rim	Q-17
Solaceterra	Hunnoverrs	Outer Rim	R-17
Solanus[389]	Dominus	Outer Rim	U-7
Solay	Dominus	Outer Rim	U-7
Somnia	Borderland of the Old Ones	Illathurion	N/A
Somov Rit	Onatos	Mid Rim	R-15
Sonn Vilmari	Colundra	Outer Rim	S-5
Sooma	Thanium	Outer Rim	R-6
Sorbo	Cassander	Outer Rim	K-5
Sorjus	Meridian	Outer Rim	R-7
Sorrus	Kalamith	Outer Rim	O-5
Soum	Suolriep	Outer Rim	S-8
Source[390]	Baxel	Outer Rim	T-12
Spathiwa[391]		Inner Rim	N-14
Spinax	Allied Tion	Outer Rim	S-6
Spinstones, The		Inner Rim	M-8
Spira	Lytton	Core Worlds	L-10
Sriluur[392]	Tharin (Periphery)	Outer Rim	S-8
Star-Tombs, The	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Stellan	Hunnoverrs	Outer Rim	R-16

[388] Known in ancient times as Eklaa.
[389] Known in ancient times as Solaris.
[390] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Beta Corvi.
[391] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Epsilon Gruis.
[392] Known in ancient times as Srilla.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Stennaros	Har Worlds	Expansion Region	K-16
Stenness	Airon	Inner Rim	O-10
Stenos	Spadja	Outer Rim	R-5
Sthanee	Desolate Harbinger	Illathurion	N/A
Stic	Xappyh	Outer Rim	Q-3
Stratos Distribution	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-11
Stronghold	Taldot	Mid Rim	R-8
Suarbi	Quence	Outer Rim	O-19
Suen	Ninmah Cluster	Companion Esk	N/A
Sufezz	Jubilar	Outer Rim	T-8
Sullust	Brema	Outer Rim	M-17
Sumix	N/A	Companion Aurek	N/A
Sunim	Thusa	Mid Rim	O-7
Suolriep	Suolriep	Outer Rim	S-8
Sur'Kesh	Annos Basin	Companion Esk	N/A
Susuum	Islands of Iteration	Apeiron	N/A
Suventa	Veragi	Outer Rim	K-3
Svivren	Svivreni	Outer Rim	O-19
Sy Myrth	Jospro	Outer Rim	S-7
Sybrial	Vodilux	Inner Rim	K-14
Syl	Sertar	Outer Rim	R-5
Sylenia		Colonies	L-13
Symbia[393]		Deep Core	K-10
Synestia of Tulu	Xothic Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Syngia[394]	Sertar	Outer Rim	R-5
Syra	Brema	Outer Rim	M-17
Syrox Sinkhole	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Syzygy Rift	Gnossus Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Taautuz	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Tabor	Toblain	Outer Rim	O-18
Tages	Haruspex Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Tammuz-an	Tammuz	Outer Rim	T-14
Taral	Calamari	Outer Rim	U-7
Targonn	Freestanding Subsector	Outer Rim	U-7
Tarhun	Heptad Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Taris	Ojoster (Taris)	Outer Rim	N-7
Tarkon	Dantus	Outer Rim	J-6
Tarnar	Kailion	Expansion Region	O-13

[393] Known in ancient times as Symbion.
[394] Known to the Humans of Corona V as Cygnia.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Tarnoonga	Arkanis	Outer Rim	R-17
Tasariq		Inner Rim	J-14
Tascollan	Abrion	Outer Rim	S-15
Tastini	Calaron	Outer Rim	U-9
Tatooine[395]	Arkanis	Outer Rim	R-16
Tau Sakar	Abrion	Outer Rim	S-15
Tau Volantis	Gla'aki Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Taypho[396]	Dononter	Mid Rim	I-16
Tchuukthon	N/A	Unknown Regions	F-13
Te Hasa	Veragi (Gree Enclave)	Outer Rim	K-2
Teevan	Kalamith	Outer Rim	P-5
Teirasa	Iskin	Mid Rim	O-16
Tel	Halthor	Outer Rim	L-6
Teloe	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Tempes[397]	Atravis	Outer Rim	L-19
Tencton	Islands of Iteration	Apeiron	N/A
Tera Con Prime	Spinward	Outer Rim	K-2
Terminus[398]	Kallea	Outer Rim	K-20
Terra Sool[399]	Immeria	Expansion Region	O-14
TerraAsta[400]		Colonies	L-9
Terran Raa	N/A	Unknown Regions	I-8
Tertiary Kesmere	Raioballo	Outer Rim	L-4
Tervissis	Sertar	Outer Rim	R-5
Tessida	Cademimu	Outer Rim	L-6
Tetra Hex, The	Kernunus Cluster (Fomori)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Teyr[401]		Colonies	L-13
Tezzub	Heptad Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Th'irus	N/A	Wild Space	S-4
Thakwaa	Tunka	Outer Rim	I-19
Thalassia	Meram	Outer Rim	P-4
Thallarna	N/A	Unknown Regions	F-7
Thandruss	Thand	Expansion Region	J-15
Thasaidon's Comets	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Thape	Lambda	Mid Rim	Q-15

[395] Known in ancient times as Tunit and Fum Tatawin.
[396] Known in ancient times as Tay'to.
[397] Known in ancient times as Tempest.
[398] Known in ancient times as Corona.
[399] Known in ancient times as Sol and Terra Solaris.
[400] Known in ancient times as Terra I.
[401] Known in ancient times as Teyn.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Thearterra	Chiss Space	Unknown Regions	E-8
Thel	Chain of Aforgomon	Apeiron	N/A
Thela[402]	Aparo	Outer Rim	R-4
Theselena	Minos Cluster	Outer Rim	M-20
Thisspias	Farstey	Expansion Region	O-8
Tholian	Meram	Outer Rim	P-4
ThonBoka Nebula	Centrality	Outer Rim	U-8
Thonner	Zuma (Moddell)	Outer Rim	H-16
Thosa	Wyl	Outer Rim	R-4
Thra[403]		Deep Core	L-11
Thradda[404]	Yminis	Outer Rim	S-14
Thule[405]	Esstran	Outer Rim	Q-5
Thule Minor		Colonies	L-13
Thune	Wazta	Outer Rim	I-18
Thustra	Sumitra	Expansion Region	O-7
Thyferra	Jaso	Inner Rim	L-14
Thyrsus		Inner Rim	M-8
Tibrin	Hadar	Mid Rim	L-18
Til	N/A	Unknown Regions	F-14
Tindalos Gate	Angled Space	Apeiron	N/A
Tinit	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Tinnell	Chaama	Mid Rim	J-7
Tion	Tion Hegemony	Outer Rim	S-5
Tirahn	Zeemacht Cluster	Inner Rim	N-8
Tisht	N/A	Hutt Space	T-11
Tiss'sharl	Xappyh	Outer Rim	R-4
Tiyar	Ragnar Cluster (Esse)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
T'kkr	Circarpous	Expansion Region	O-12
Tlönia	Demetras	Outer Rim	P-7
Tocoya	Ktilac Regions	Inner Rim	N-9
Tof	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Togoria	Taldot	Mid Rim	P-9
Tokmia	Javin (Anoat)	Outer Rim	K-18
Tolaniisi	Abrion	Outer Rim	S-15
Tomo-Reth		Inner Rim	L-14
Ton Muund	Corusca	Core Worlds	L-9

[402] Known in ancient times as Thalassa.
[403] Known in ancient times as Mitra.
[404] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Delta Draconis.
[405] Theorised to have originated in the Desolate Harbinger of Illathurion, Thule Minor and Ultima Thule may be manifestations of the same planet.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Toola	Nilgaard	Outer Rim	S-5
Toong'L	Jubilar	Outer Rim	T-7
Torbraleen	Saijo	Outer Rim	K-20
Tortuna	Chopani[406]	Outer Rim	M-4
Tramm	Javin (Yarith)	Outer Rim	J-18
Trammis	Centrality	Outer Rim	U-8
Trascor	Corva	Outer Rim	P-3
Traska	N/A	Unknown Regions	F-13
Tri-System	Bruanii	Mid Rim	K-17
Trian	Trianii Space	Wild Space	R-3
Tridan[407]	Arc d'Stot	Expansion Region	K-15
Triitus	Corva	Outer Rim	P-4
Trillia	Imberlin	Expansion Region	P-13
Trimorphic Sea	Gnossus Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Trindello	Zuma (Moddell)	Outer Rim	H-16
Trinia	Bozhnee	Outer Rim	L-18
Trinta	Halthor	Outer Rim	L-6
Troiken	Colundra	Outer Rim	S-5
Tropicant	Thesme	Outer Rim	O-6
Trulfk	N/A	Companion Cresh	N/A
Trunska		Colonies	J-13
Tschai		Wild Space	L-21
T'surr	Nuon e Safyd	Expansion Region	P-12
Tucan		Colonies	L-13
Tulpaa	Rakatan Archipelago	Unknown Regions	H-6
Tund[408]	Centrality	Outer Rim	U-8
Tunorr	Ragnar Cluster (Esse)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Twilight Void, The	N/A	Unknown Regions	D-7
Twin Nebulae	Javin	Outer Rim	K-18
Twith		Core Worlds	K-9
Twon Ketee	Sujimis	Outer Rim	P-19
Tyberious		Inner Rim	L-8
Tyluun	Juvex	Mid Rim	L-18
Tyrvash	Onatos	Mid Rim	R-15
Tython[409]		Deep Core	L-10
Tyus Cluster	Tyus	Mid Rim	N-16

[406] Known to the Humans of Terra II as the Empty Zone.
[407] Colloquially known as Gandahar.
[408] Known in ancient times as Tond. Transplanted from the Desolate Harbinger of Illathurion.
[409] Known in ancient times as Talss.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
U-One	N/A	Unknown Regions	U-1
Uba	Barsa	Mid Rim	J-6
Ubuuga	Halori	Mid Rim	Q-7
Ukio	Abrion	Outer Rim	S-15
Ugartte		Colonies	M-9
Uhluhtc[410]	Twilight Vigil	Illathurion	N/A
Ulgra Conurbation	Ragnar Cluster (Vane)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Uliqummi Void	Heptad Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Ultaar	Bortele	Mid Rim	R-8
Ultima Thule	N/A	Wild Space	K-21
Ultra	Kallea	Outer Rim	K-20
Umaren'k	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-9
Umateal	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Umbara	Ghost Nebula	Expansion Region	P-10
Umgul[411]	Mulgard	Mid Rim	N-16
Unagin	Al'Nasrl	Outer Rim	T-13
Unapu	Izamá Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Unhallowed Ring, The	Loch-Mot Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Unzervalt	Rocantor	Expansion Region	L-15
Upelluri	Heptad Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Urdur[412]	Corporate	Outer Rim	S-4
Urkupp	Auril	Outer Rim	R-6
Urlu	Purple Void	Unknown Regions	???
Ur'lyeh	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Uroboris		Deep Core	K-11
Urthha	Ghooric Zone	Illathurion[413]	N/A
Uru	Atravis	Outer Rim	L-19
Ushruu	Palamut	Expansion Region	O-13
Usk	N/A	Hutt Space	T-10
Utapau	Tarabba	Outer Rim	N-19
Utrost	Corusca (Coruscant)	Core Worlds	L-9
Uukaablis	Kathol (Outback)	Outer Rim	M-21
Uvena	Seswenna	Outer Rim	M-18
Uzum	Volcarum Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Vaathkree	Tharin (Periphery)	Outer Rim	S-8
Vagar Praxut	Kharmort's Miasma	Unknown Regions	H-9

[410] Colloquially known as Neverwhere.
[411] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Beta Orionis.
[412] A corruption of the original UrDur.
[413] Originally located in the Shiva system of Wild Space, before being claimed by Thargorograht.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Valahari	D'Astan (Valahari)	Outer Rim	N-5
Valldon	N/A	Unknown Regions	F-5
Valley of Wandering Stars	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Valtaullu	Valtaullu Rift	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Valtava	Valtava	Wild Space	K-2
Vanqor	Sertar	Outer Rim	R-5
Vanya	Rseik	Outer Rim	N-20
Varl	N/A	Hutt Space	S-11
Varlinaar[414]	Koradin	Outer Rim	J-18
Varna	Relgim	Outer Rim	L-4
Varonat	Javin (Anoat)	Outer Rim	K-18
Varvva	Barsa	Mid Rim	J-6
Vasha	Zuma (Moddell)	Outer Rim	H-16
Vaynai	Chorlian	Outer Rim	S-4
Veldt	N/A	Companion Besh	N/A
Velmor	Halori	Mid Rim	P-7
Veltai	Viis Space	Unknown Regions	E-15
Velusia[415]		Core Worlds	L-9
Ventooine[416]	Corva	Outer Rim	P-3
Ventrexia	Corosi	Outer Rim	N-6
Veragi	Veragi	Outer Rim	L-3
Verda	Manda	Mid Rim	R-15
Vergama Cataclysm	Xothic Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Vermes	The Cold Sovereignty	Illathurion	N/A
Veroleem	N/A	Unknown Regions	I-6
Vesari		Inner Rim	O-10
Vhoorl	Xothic Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Viismyel	Viis Space	Unknown Regions	E-15
Viga[417]	Lostar	Expansion Region	M-7
Vilosoria	Lifh	Mid Rim	R-8
Vinsoth	Quelii	Outer Rim	N-5
Virgill	Trans-Vulta	Mid Rim	N-7
Vitae	Kessel	Outer Rim	T-10
Vix'ni Aldru	Xothic Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Vjun[418]	Nuiri	Outer Rim	Q-6
Vlata Yhom	Esaga (Malicrux)	Mid Rim	R-11

[414] Known in ancient times as Vhorlin.
[415] Known in ancient times as Valusia and Vahlusia.
[416] Known in ancient times as Vannus.
[417] Known in ancient times as Vega.
[418] Known in ancient times as Djun.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Vlik[419]	N/A	Wild Space	T-19
Vodran	N/A	Hutt Space	S-9
Void Horror	Ghooric Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Void of Aeon	Gnossus Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Void of Chopani	Chopani[420]	Outer Rim	L-4/L-5
Volfied		Inner Rim	M-13
Volgax		Core Worlds	K-10
Vonak	Dalonbian	Outer Rim	L-3
Voorlach	Duluur	Colonies	M-13
Vortex	Glythe	Mid Rim	K-7
Vortex of Zushakon	Xothic Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Vorzyd	Vorzyd	Outer Rim	R-6
Voss	Allied Tion	Outer Rim	S-6
Vrakolia		Core Worlds	K-13
Vreetan		Colonies	L-13
V'shar	N/A	Wild Space	U-15
Vulta	Trans-Vulta	Mid Rim	N-7
Vultar		Core Worlds	L-10
Vulthoom Ravine	Garden of the Lorelei	Illathurion	N/A
Vultur	Ragnar Cluster (Vane)	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Vusstra	Seitia	Outer Rim	K-20
Vux[421]	Alchenaut	Expansion Region	L-16
Wayland	Ojoster	Outer Rim	N-7
Waymancy		Inner Rim	K-8
Weerden	Corusca	Core Worlds	K-9
Well of the Forsaken	Bayal Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Wen'he'dinae	Eidoloni	Mid Rim	L-16
Wirut	Islands of Iteration	Apeiron	N/A
Wizar	N/A	Wild Space	I-8
Wodan	Hapes Cluster	Inner Rim	O-9
Wol Cabassh	Quelii	Outer Rim	O-6
Wolax	Great Black Nest	Illathurion	N/A
Wor Tandell	Dolomar	Core Worlds	K-9
Worrit	Freestanding Subsector	Core Worlds	J-10
Worxer	Elrood	Outer Rim	M-20
Wrea[422]	Gaulus	Outer Rim	S-17

[419] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Beta Librae.
[420] Known in ancient times as Ch'hopani.
[421] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Beta Luyten.
[422] Formally known as Delta Pavonis.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Wroona		Inner Rim	L-15
Wukkar		Core Worlds	L-10
Wyndigal	Ash Worlds	Outer Rim	S-7
Xaava-Dal	Fellwe	Expansion Region	L-8
Xaczhick	Valtaullu Rift	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Xadum[423]	N/A	Unknown Regions	H-13
Xantar	Corva	Outer Rim	P-4
Xanthiir	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Xarbia	Trestis	Expansion Region	K-8
Xen	Desolate Harbinger	Illathurion	N/A
Xena	Cassander	Outer Rim	K-5
Xerxes		Core Worlds	M-11
Xibabal	Outer Darkness	Illathurion	N/A
Xiccarph	Twilight Vigil	Illathurion	N/A
Xo[424]	Spinward	Outer Rim	N-2
Xolu		Hutt Space	S-13
Xorg-Grenz	Lannik Wilds	Mid Rim	R-13
Xotiko	Yminis	Outer Rim	S-14
Xuaquarres	Ash Worlds	Outer Rim	S-7
Yaddith	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Yaga Minor	Prefsbelt	Outer Rim	K-5
Yag'Dhul	Givin Domain	Inner Rim	L-14
Yanglin	N/A	Unknown Regions	H-8
Yar Togna	Sarin	Outer Rim	P-18
Yarik-sin	Loch-Mot Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Yarin		Inner Rim	N-7
Yarno	Palamut	Expansion Region	N-13
Yavin[425]	Gordian Reach	Outer Rim	P-6
Ychthyton	Belderone	Outer Rim	R-6
Ydmos	Twilight Vigil	Illathurion	N/A
Yedar Gate	N/A	Unknown Regions	F-5
Yehat[426]	Irnaj	Mid Rim	K-16
Yekub	Lair of the Soulworms	Illathurion	N/A
Ygam	The Cold Sovereignty	Illathurion	N/A
Ygziir	N/A	Companion Cresh	N/A
Yhoundeh	Borderland of the Old Ones	Illathurion	N/A

[423] Known in ancient times as Xadadrond.
[424] Known in ancient times as Xoth. Transplanted from the Desolate Harbinger of Illathurion.
[425] Known in ancient times as Yeh and Yahven.
[426] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Gamma Serepentis.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Yilla	Borderland of the Old Ones	Illathurion	N/A
Yinchorr	Fellwe	Expansion Region	L-8
Ylesia[427]	N/A	Hutt Space	T-12
Yn		Inner Rim	K-14
Yoggoy[428]	N/A	Unknown Regions	H-7
Yrimid[429]	N/A	[Rogue star]	N/A
Yugami[430]	Atravis	Outer Rim	L-19
Yumar	Ghooric Zone	Illathurion	N/A
Yuria		Inner Rim	N-13
Yutan	Ombakond	Expansion Region	P-12
Yuuzhan'tar[431]	N/A	Companion Cresh	N/A
Yvara	Kathol (Rift)	Outer Rim	M-21
Zaad	N/A	Pendar	N/A
Zabba	Bheriz	Outer Rim	T-11
Zairon	Atrisian Commonwealth	Core Worlds	J-12
Zakara	Hormahket Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Zakkun	Loch-Mot Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Zakuul	N/A	Unknown Regions	D-13
Zandor	Calaron	Outer Rim	U-9
Zantas Prime	Heptad Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Zardossa Stix		Colonies	J-13
Zaria	Juvex	Mid Rim	L-17
Zarr	N/A	Companion Dorn	N/A
Zarruma	Heptad Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Zatar	N/A	Companion Aurek	N/A
Zätichin[432]	Braxant	Outer Rim	K-3
Zedar	Venaarian	Mid Rim	O-7
Zeffo	Kanz	Outer Rim	M-3
ZeHeth	Dustig	Mid Rim	N-16
Zelos	Tyus	Mid Rim	N-16
Zeltros		Inner Rim	O-10
Zender[433]	Calaron	Outer Rim	U-9
Zenet	N/A	Unknown Regions	G-8

[427] Known in ancient times as Catelesia and Elysia, named by failed Catumen and Human colonies that were enslaved by the Hutts.
[428] Known in ancient times as Xaxax.
[429] Also known as Yamil Zacra or colloquially as Pnidleethon. Its intelligent star is believed to most commonly reside in the Gla'aki Cluster of the Nihil Retreat.
[430] Known in ancient times as Yuggoth. Transplanted from the Desolate Harbinger of Illathurion.
[431] Known in ancient times as Aerimus.
[432] Known to the Humans of Sol as Sirius.
[433] Known in ancient times as Gorarch.

SYSTEM	SECTOR	REGION	COORDINATES
Zenno	Seswenna	Outer Rim	M-18
Zeta[434]	The Wastes	Wild Space	K-2
Zigoola	N/A	Wild Space	U-6
Zimut	Volcarum Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Zin Taal	Carrion	Outer Rim	J-4
Ziost	Esstran (Sith Worlds)	Outer Rim	R-4
Z'lykarior	The Cold Sovereignty	Illathurion	N/A
Zofeit	Clacis	Outer Rim	K-4
Zolan	Lambda	Mid Rim	P-16
Zoma	Hunnoverrs	Outer Rim	S-17
Zonama Sekot[435]	N/A	[Rogue planet]	N/A
Zongorlu	Noonian	Outer Rim	M-6
Zoq'fot'pik[436]	Primtara	Mid Rim	P-15
Zor	N/A	Companion Cresh	N/A
Zoraster[437]	Zoraster	Outer Rim	U-13
Zot	Gigas Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
Zotakh	Pelgrin	Outer Rim	S-18
Zubula Fissure	Volcarum Cluster	Nihil Retreat	N/A
ZXK-100346	Atravis	Outer Rim	L-19
Zygerria	Chorlian	Outer Rim	S-4

[434] Known in ancient times as Zetakron.
[435] Known in ancient times as Tsonoma-Sekt. Believed to currently reside in the Unknown Regions, F-13.
[436] Known to the Humans of Cyrannis as Alpha Tucanae.
[437] Known in ancient times as Zarathrustra.

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Andrew Long
Patrick Lynch
Sam Collins Macfarlane
Alex Maciel
Sifis Mainas
Michael Malerba
Stephen Matousek
Shane Matt
Benjamin McDonnell
Scott McIntosh
Brian C. McKinley
Alasdair McLean
Aaron Mercer
Eddie Meza
Jonny Mike
Josiah Miller
Dan Mings
Johann Mitzscherlich
Peter Monaco
Jade Moonstroller
Maxine Morrell
Carlos Munoz
Nathan Myers
Dan Mylott
Brady Nabors
Daniel Nabors
Stefan Nashawati
Caleb Nelson
Robert Newnham
Trey Norman
Paris Obregon
Teddy Otero
Christian Oxford
Sarah Palazzetti
Samantha Paustian
Alex Payne
Kyle Peach
Abel G. Peña
Brady Perkins
Georgette Pew
Kevin Pickett
Curtis Plumley
Aaron Pokoj
Michael Potemkin
Chris Powell
Miah Pyland
Gary Raia
Ryan Reynolds
Daniel Rippstein
Matthew Robare
Kyle Rodriguez
Eric Rodwan-Gordon
Luis Rosario
Marcel Ryan
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Joshua Scheibe
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Chris Schnitzer
Nick Schuessler
Evan Schultheis
Gram Seelund
Isaac Semmelmann
Joshua Sharrow
Rihanna Short
Chris Sinor
Marcus Sitonio
Raven Skousen
Kathryn Smith
Mark Smith
Drake Spielmaker
Dillon Spikings
Michael Steinberg
Jacob Suydam
Jason Szo
Abe Thomas
Dom Thomson
Trevor Tocco
Ethan Tu
Caitlin Tuke
Patrick Tuttle
Binary Unit
Maxwell Unnasch
George V.
Eddie van der Heijden
Gary Varga
Bryan Varnell
Jeroen Veenman
Veronica
John Vougias
Josiah Walton
Corinthia Warner
Lochlan C Weatherford
K. Webster
Jeff Weekly
Christopher Weidmüller
Sebastian Weinert
Elaine Weinheimer
Andrea Whisman
Ryan Wiens
Jimmy Williams
Matt Wilkins
Tom Winship
Steven Woods
Cameron Wooten
Xelfraa
Christopher Young
Zachary Younghans

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In his ever-expanding library where he caters to the demands too many pets, New York native Joe Bongiorno has co-written with Alan Berry the documentaries, *Black Sabbath—Master of Reality* and *Black Sabbath—Vol 4*. Joe is the editor of *The Lost Tales of Oz* and *Cyberpunk Nexus: Exploring the Blade Runner Universe*, and author of numerous essays and short stories on *Star Wars, Battlestar Galactica, Twin Peaks, the X-Files, Oz,* and *The Planet of the Apes* for Sequart Press, ATB Publishing, Wizards of the Coast, and the International Wizard of Oz Club. Joe is in the midst of the eight-volume *Black Sabbath: The Illustrated Lyrics* series and in his spare time studies weird fiction, runs a small-press publishing company, and manages the Star Wars Expanded Universe Timeline, the Royal Timeline of Oz, and The X-Files Chronology.

INFERNAL ENDNOTES

"Be careful what you wish you," the old maxim goes. Fans asked for endnotes, which seemed like a good idea at the time, but even I couldn't anticipate just how extensive they'd turn out to be. Interspersed amongst this copious reference material are anecdotes relating to the creation and development of *Supernatural Encounters*. Hope you enjoy! Note: there remain several Easter Eggs I've not sourced. Some things are more fun discovered on their own...

Title Page

[1] From Robert E. Howard's *Savage Tales of Solomon Kane*. The original reads: "Over the souls of men spread the condor wings of colossal monsters and all manner of evil things prey upon the heart and soul and body of Man. Yet it may be in some far day the shadows shall fade and the Prince of Darkness be chained forever in his hell. And till then mankind can but stand up stoutly to the monsters in his own heart and without, and with the aid of God he may yet triumph."

Introduction

[2] For a discussion on the reasons to capitalize Humans along with all the other races, please see the article here: https://mwchase.com/2009/02/22/capitalization-of-fantasy-races/.

Prologue

[3] The original reads: "Now, if this be true, there is no limit to the horror to which mankind may be heir. If this be true, men may be hovering forever on the brink of unthought oceans of supernatural terror, parted from the next world by a thin veil which may be rent, as we have just seen it rent." From Robert E. Howard's "The Noseless Horror."

[4] Arhul Hextrophon was created by Bill Slavicsec and Curtis Smith for the *Star Wars Sourcebook*, published by West End Games in 1987. The purpose he served in these and subsequent books by West End Games and other sources, such as Russel DeMaria's "A Call to Reason" in *The Farlander Papers* (included with the home video game *X-Wing;* LucasArts), was to provide an in-universe historical perspective on the *Star Wars* galaxy, and one that would allow room for error. Numerous other historians and journalists would come to follow in his wake. Hextrophon was later given a face in the *Star Wars Insider* #133 (the "Rogues Gallery" feature) when Leland Chee saw fit to provide names for various unnamed characters in *A New Hope*, many of which came from the Expanded Universe. Thus, Arhul Hextrophon was retroactively placed in the Medal of Bravery scene at the end of the 1977 *Star Wars* film, as played by actor Nick Joseph, who went on to embrace the character in subsequent years and who supported this book.

[5] The Sylphe King of Sainte-Evanëflore comes from the Sylphe race of the "La Veuve Noire," a roleplaying scenario published in the French RPG magazine *Avalon #2* (1991). Their homeworld Sainte-Evanëflore was mentioned in *Casus Belli #95* (1996). A botanical race known for their pacifism, their king was known as Lord of the Foliage. The Nuiwit are a pacifist lizard race who made their first appearance as "Altorian Lizards" (named after their homeworld Altor 14) in West End Games' *Galaxy Guide 2: Yavin and Bespin*, after which they appeared in Troy Denning's choose-your-own-adventure book *Scoundrel's Luck* (West End Games).

[6] That opening was borrowed from the Dead Can Dance song "In Power We Entrust the Love Advocated," from the *Garden of the Arcane Delights* (4AD). Music informs a few things in SE.

[7] Hextrophon's back-story comes from the *Star Wars Sourcebook* (West End Games). Wookieepedia editors made the assumption that Arhul's family were made up of a wife and children, but this is never stated or implied in the text. It took me a few drafts to get Hextrophon's characterization to where it needed to be. I took the advice of my first proofreader Derek Stevens who suggested that he be given a stronger voice, as Q9 is a bit of a scene stealer.

[8] Shadow Beings were conceived as the means to kick off the story with the horror elements built up in *Cult Encounters*. The Shadow Beings were created before *Crucible*'s Shadow Spirits or the Living Force RPGA's Shadow Lurkers. Preceding all of them are the Shadow Demons of

Dungeons & Dragons first *Monster Manual* (TSR, 1983), and although I owned that book since its release, I'd written a short story several years prior which featured Shadow Beings. In any case, they're servants of the Father of Shadows, a reference that derives from Alan Moore's Marvel UK story "The Pandora Effect" (*The Empire Strikes Back Monthly #151*), which presents this entity as a Satanic figure worshiped by the dark cult known as The Five. It's no accident that they're portrayed as Shadow Men, believed by many to be demonic beings who terrorize sufferers of sleep paralysis. (See the documentary *The Nightmare*, Gravitas Ventures). The Father of Shadows and "Father of Lies" (John 8:44) are connected conceptions here. Lucas said in an interview with Alan Dean Foster: "We also wanted to have a scene where Vader goes and bows before the Force and the Force picks him up and tells him that he better go out and get that crystal… But it's not the Force personified; it's on the verge of personification. Maybe it's a shadow or something…. It's the ultimate evil. It's the devil."

Book I: The Trial

[9] From Immanuel Velikovsky, *Peoples of the Sea: A Reconstruction of Ancient History.* The original is close to it: "The 'astronomical chronology' is a framework of the scientific structure of Egyptian history and, consequently, of the history of the ancient world… The specialists in astronomical chronology made their calculations and announced their expert results. The specialists in pottery took the results of the specialists in Sothic computation as a firm base on which to build. Specialists in the history of art, the history of religion, philology, and history in general followed. Difficulties were swept away…The readers of cuneiform borrow dates from the readers of hieroglyphics; the Bible exegetes from the archaeologist; the historians from all of them. Thus there came into existence an elaborate entrenched system that bears very little resemblance to the real past… The Sothic scheme of ancient chronology of the world is rooted in fallacy… and the history of the world is built on this chronology."

Chapter 1: Division & Debate

[10] The dating is set prior to the *Fate of the Jedi* series. Although Tionne and Leia hear the name, Belot, at this conference, it's but one of hundreds of new names and concepts that they hear. If one assumes that they remember it years later when Abeloth appears, there's nothing in the *Fate of the Jedi* series that precludes them having heard it before and had an offscreen moment in which they talk about it. Incidentally, the ghost of Mara Jade told Luke that Abeloth was one of the Old Ones. Since Luke doesn't ask what the Old Ones are, the implication is that he already knows, possibly from Hextrophon's manuscript. Same with the events that transpire at the end of the Council meeting regarding the possession of Hanapen; in *Crucible* it says of Leia, "She knew of other cases in which a dark side spirit had taken control of another being…"

[11] This is the first that we're hearing of Hextrophon's death and manner of death, which is a rather disturbing end… or so we're led to think. It's also the first time we meet Ulm-Aaa-Janzikek in this story. He was a fun character to write. His sole prior appearance was in Michael Allen Horne's *Han Solo and the Corporate Sector Handbook* (West End Games), which identified Han's adversary, Uul-Rha-Shan, as a Tiss'shar.

[12] Voren Na'al was developed in *Galaxy Guide 1: A New Hope* (West End Games) and went on to appear in a lot of later West End Games material. The "Rogues Gallery" article of the *Star Wars Insider* #133 also retroactively gave him a role in *A New Hope*, as played by actor Derek Lyons. The Swarm War is a reference to the events that occurred in the *Dark Nest* trilogy.

[13] Abric Hanapen was my own creation. The Velmoc race was introduced by Mike W. Barr in *Star Wars #49*: "The Last Jedi" (Marvel), which featured a very sympathetic character in Jedidiah. I wanted a Velmoc that was the opposite.

[14] Mungo Baobab comes from the *Droids* animated series. Adventurous, single-minded, with a strong moral code, Baobab is one of the great protagonists of that series and I aimed to show that his passion and loyalty hadn't diminished in his older years. In "Lando Calrissian: Idiot's Array" (Hyperspace), we find out he married his sweetheart Auren Yomm.

[15] Chief Historian Donn Gulek made his first appearance in *Cracken's Threat Dossier* (West End Games), where he's said to have written, "Ten Years After: Notes on the Mature Organizational and Administrative Structure of the New Republic."

[16] This argument starts the framework for the debate between conservative academicians, who make up the majority of the Historical Council, and Hextrophon's friends and rogue academicians, who accept Hextrophon's work irrespective of the fact that it posits a supernatural premise for life in the universe. Apart from the obvious nod to real-world debates of this nature, the argument bears merit in the larger narrative of Star Wars fiction, which posits both a materialistic origin in the Bantam novels and West End Games books and competing supernatural one in the comics and Del Rey material. Alan Moore's "Tilotny Throws a Shape" (*The Empire Strikes Back Monthly #154*; Marvel UK, 1982) presents godlike beings who can reshape life and bend the rules of time without so much as a blink. In "The Pandora Effect" (*The Empire Strikes Back Monthly #151*, Marvel UK, 1981), another impossibly powerful godlike entity, Wutzek, shows Chewbacca the creation of the universe in which he and his kind roamed the stars. *The Corellian Trilogy* (Bantam-Spectra, 1995), *The Essential Atlas* (Del Rey, 2009), the *Dark Nest Trilogy* (Del Rey, 2005-6), the *Legacy of the Force* series (Del Rey, 2006-8), and the *Fate of the Jedi* series (Del Rey, 2009-12), put forth a scenario in which powerful godlike Celestials are responsible for astronomical phenomena such as the construction of entire solar systems. Add to this the Ones from *The Clone Wars* (Season Three) and you have two sides of a debate. The additional aspect that I felt important to take into account was the worldview of George Lucas, who has stated in regards to his inspiration for the Force: "I wanted a concept of religion based on the premise that there is a God and there is good and evil." (*Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace Scrapbook*, Random House). Lucas identifies as a Christian Methodist-Buddhist, in other words, someone who follows the teachings of Jesus Christ and the sayings espoused by Siddhārtha Gautama in the Four Noble Truths (expressed in this story as the Four Precepts) and the Noble Eightfold path. While Buddhism is noted for its pacifism, Christianity has pacifism as a central tenet in the New Testament, which Christians of the first two centuries strictly followed. That the later churches of Christendom, Catholic and Protestant, chose to ignore or repudiate that teaching has no bearing on the matter. As earlier noted in my essay "Star Wars and Peace" (*A Long Time Ago*; Sequart Books): "This deeper understanding of good and evil is not just tangentially related to *Star Wars*, but foundational to it, according to Lucas, who unequivocally stated: 'I believe in God and I believe in right and wrong. I also believe that there are basic tenets which through history have developed into certainties, such as 'thou shalt not kill'… *'Do unto others…' is the philosophy that permeates my work.* '" (italics my own). "Do unto others," known as the Golden Rule, is a quote from Jesus Christ in the New Testament (Luke 6:31, Matt 5:38-48, 7:12, 22: 37-40, John 13:34-35), and a *foundational doctrine* of Christianity (Rom 13:8-10, Gal 5:14). While some see *Star Wars* as pantheistic, Lucas countered that in an interview with Bill Moyers ("Of Myth and Men," *Time Magazine*, April 18, 1999) in which he bemoaned the fact that the Bible and organized religion had been supplanted by "a completely secular world where entertainment was passing for some kind of religious experience." He said: "I wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery. Not having enough interest in the mysteries of life to ask the question, 'Is there a God or is there not a God?'—that is for me the worst thing that can happen. I think you should have an opinion about that. Or you should be saying, 'I'm looking. I'm very curious about this, and I am going to continue to look until I can find an answer, and if I can't find an answer, then I'll die trying.' I think it's important to have a belief system and to have faith." With this in mind, the reader might better understand why, in a story dealing with ontological issues and the search for truth, the supernatural worldview is presented as a foundation of life in the *Star Wars* galaxy within the context of a debate in which alternate perspectives are also present.

[17] Proof you can still be silly in a serious environment. While Roundtree scholar Rekkon and his nephew, Tchaka, are pre-existing characters from Brian Daley's *Han Solo at Star's End* (Del

Rey), the surname Marshall I added to play on the similarity between Tchaka and Cha-ka, the Pakuni character who became part of the Marshall family in the American children's TV series *Land of the Lost* (Sid and Marty Krofft/CBS, 1974-77). Given that there's a Pakuuni planet (*Star Wars: TIE Fighter*, LucasArts), it seemed a not inappropriate homage.

[18] The Mrlssi, Dee Savyest, comes from the comic-book *X-Wing: Rogue Squadron #7*: "The Phantom Affair" (Dark Horse). Wookieepedia writes of him, "Savyest was overcome with denial, convincing himself that the Death Star could not possibly have been capable of destroying a planet."

[19] Reina Solov comes from *Platt's Starport Guide* (West End Games). In this case, her characterization as "dry" comes directly from the portrayal of her in that guide, which is a bit unfair to her; I'm certain that despite Na'al's commentary, she has a fun side.

[20] I've always liked Mammon Hoole. He debuted in Kevin J. Anderson's *The Illustrated Star Wars Universe* (Bantam-Spectra), but it wasn't until John Whitman's *Galaxy of Fear* series (Bantam-Spectra) that he really sprung to life as more than just an academic. Matt Wilkins, host of the famous YouTube series *Matt's Expanded Universe*, and early proofreader for *Supernatural Encounters*, pointed out that he wasn't used to seeing Hoole so agitated, which was a good point, so I made it clearer that despite his normal equanimity in the face of marauding monsters and children, the members of the Historical Society were the one group that really set him off.

[21] Dr. Insmot Bowen comes from *The Essential Guide to Warfare: Author's Cut*, in the prologue called "The Celestials" (Star Wars Blog). Bowen was an iconoclast in that he boldly declared the universe to have been created by the Celestials, and even debated that point with Admiral Motti. Bowen is considered a legend at the Obroan Institute for Archaeology, but this particular idea is a bit of an embarrassment to them, as they've ironically come to embrace Motti's perspective.

[22] In truth, it's probably less about book sales, which are likely only being purchased by other universities (though I suppose in the *Star Wars* galaxy that can amount to quite a bit), than it is their pride and staunch attachment to their theories. The Lekuan University comes from the excellent L. Neill Smith story *Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu* (Del Rey).

[23] For many years, the identity of the Celestials, Architects, and Old Ones was a complete mystery. Apart from the aforementioned work of Alan Moore, which hadn't been in print for about fifteen years until Dark Horse's two-part *Devilworlds*, the idea of a precursor race of deity-like beings derives from Roger MacBride Allen's *The Corellian Trilogy*, which has them responsible for the massive construction known as Centerpoint Station, which they used to put the Corellian system in orbit. The term "Celestial" was first used as their identifying nomenclature in Troy Denning's *Dark Nest I: The Joiner King* (Del Rey), while the term "Architects" was put forward by Kevin Anderson and Daniel Wallace in *The Essential Chronology* (Del Rey). Jason Fry and Daniel Wallace's *The Essential Atlas* (Del Rey) conflated the two terms, and along with *The Essential Chronology,* solidified their hand in numerous astronomical phenomena. Writers would go on to hint at them, but never identify them until Keith Kappel linked them to the Mortis beings from the 15th to 18th episodes of the third season of *The Clone Wars* in his article "Galactic Architecture 101 and the History of Centerpoint Station" (Starwars.com blog). But many questions remained. How did they relate to the entities in Moore's story? Or the Old Ones? I first wrote *Supernatural Encounters* in late 2007, tying together the disparate "Cosmic War" narratives found throughout the Expanded Universe starting with the oldest Star Wars Expanded Universe story in 1977, Marvel's *Pizzazz* magazine story, "The Keeper's World," with the Celestials, Architects, and Old Ones in mind. It's interesting how well they all tied together and followed the same basic trajectory. The questions I set out to answer were the ones the earliest EU authors began: "What were these devastating ancient wars that drove so many races away?" and "What happened to all these powerful beings?" Given that Wutzek, Tilotny, and Typhojem were powerful enough to have eaten Palpatine for lunch and still had room left over, this latter question tied into the former.

[24] The story of the Valkyrie's crew comes from top-tier contributor Natalie Asplund who works as an illustrator and animator.

Chapter 2: Prelude & Contention

[25] Not all multi-eyed cephalopods are Lovecraftian entities. Tem Eliss and his famous work *The University of Sanbra Guide to Intelligent Life*, were first introduced into *Star Wars* lore in *Galaxy Guide 12: Aliens—Enemies and Allies*. I expanded Eliss' work in *Star Wars Gamer* #1's "University of Sanbra Guide to Intelligent Life: The Marvel Series" (Wizards of the Coast). There was a conscious effort in SE to undo some of what West End Games did in terms of racial stereotypes, e.g., all Rodians are bounty hunters; all Gamorreans are brutes.

[26] In the real world, the numbers of journalists and media workers who've been killed, detained, held hostage, or gone missing around the world are grim.

[27] The change in typeface was to provide a visual cue that we were switching to Hextrophon's document, which gives readers a better sense of where they are in the two narratives, as well as give the eyes a rest, particularly since many would be reading this online.

[28] Myk Bidlor first appeared in *Rebel Dawn* (Bantam) and is a Tuckerization of my friend and top-tier contributor Mike Beidler, creator of one of the earliest Star Wars websites, "The Star Wars Literature Compendium," where the Nevoota Bee first got started. Corellia Antilles, whose real name is Henrietya Antilles, first appeared in "The Gree Enclave," from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #8* (West End Games), a story by Timothy O'Brien, who also created the Gree species. Dr Ualp Xathan is the author of in the in-universe *One Thousand, One Hundred and Thirty-Eight Wonders of the Ancient Galaxy*. He first appeared in *Star Wars #84*: "Seoul Searching" (Marvel), the same story from which Dr. Nu-ar first appeared. He's first identified as a Gektl here. Agamar xenoarchaeologist Dr. Anki Pace comes from *The New Jedi Order: Dark Tide I: Onslaught* (Del Rey); New Republic archaeologist Garv Debble comes from *Specter of the Past* (Bantam-Spectra).

[29] The Q9 droid model first appeared in *The Corellian Trilogy* (Bantam-Spectra). With their strong personalities, ability to speak, and proclivity for upgrading themselves, I knew that if there was any droid Hextrophon would work with, it would be the Q9 model. Not surprisingly, Q9-X7 turned out to be my favorite character in the story. His long-suffering patience, which he's forced to exercise towards most he comes across, is an endless source of amusement.

[30] The idea of manumitted droids goes back in Expanded Universe lore to Brian Daley's *Han Solo's Revenge* (Del Rey), when the duo Bollux and Blue Max are given their freedom by Doc.

Chapter 3: Dichotomy

[31] The Columi were first mentioned in *Galaxy Guide 4: Alien Races*. Their arrogance towards other races whom they view as "primitives" was later reinforced by their appearance in *Crucible*, which indicates to me a cultural prejudice. Their connection to the Siniteen is my own invention. Long before the decimal system came into use, the ancient Sumero-Babylonian cultures used a sexigesimal numerical system to measure time and coordinates. The Chinese imported their system from them.

[32] Jakob Corrin and Bo-Jaccan's story comes from top-tier contributor Jacob Connor Fagg.

[33] Dating can be tricky in a universe in which its creator didn't establish the parameters and later authors and editors didn't put as much thought into the matter as they might have. After Hex meets the Watcher and follows the breadcrumbs of mythologies, he comes upon dates that are different from conventional ones and begins to see that the latter are replete with mistakes, misinterpretations, and outright fabrication, all of which cause him to start from scratch. This indicates that his introduction—or at least part of it—was later written (or re-written) after he returned home from Otherspace. Although Ismot Bowen acknowledges that the conventional dates might be wrong, Hex chooses not to list dates at all, recognizing that these will prove a stumbling block to those who support the conventionally-accepted figures. That doesn't stop him from mocking the dating of the Jerrilek civilization (from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal* story,

"Loyalties;" West End Games) and the xenobiologists of Goroth Prime (*Goroth: Slave of the Empire*; West End Games). The Tyberious Institute comes from *Creatures of the Galaxy* (West End Games). Some of this is based on historical and ongoing debates, such as between the proponents of uniformitarianism and neo-catastrophism.

[34] Apart from Hyperspace, the first time we see an alternate dimension in the Star Wars universe is the City of Dreams, a pocket dimension created by Cody Sunn-Childe, in *Star Wars #46*: "The Dreams of Cody Sunn-Childe" (Marvel). This was followed by the Netherworld of the Force (unnamed at the time of its 1984 appearance in Marvel *Star Wars #92*: "The Dream"), Otherspace, from the roleplaying game adventure of the same name (West End Games), and Waru's universe, from *The Crystal Star* (Bantam-Spectra). The idea of time dilations in pocket dimensions was made explicit by Luke Skywalker in *Crucible* when he visited the monolith in the heart of the Chiloon Rift, where within the "Bubble of the Lost," the effects of time dilation meant that five years inside the Bubble was akin to one year outside of it. It only stands to reason that if the Star Wars galaxy is itself a pocket universe, existent within its own bubble dimension, then time has a different meaning to those outside of it, such as by those of us in the Primary Universe. More on this in the Chapter 15 endnote.

[35] In Chapter 9: note #12 of *Heir to the Empire: The 20th Anniversary Edition* (Del Rey), Timothy Zahn creates an in-universe retcon for the erroneous dates in that book, chalking up the mistake to sloppy work on the part of post-Imperial historians.

[36] Conventional real-world ancient chronology is replete with artificial dark ages to the point that even traditional chronologers of ancient Egypt recognize that the system is in need of a major overhaul, though only few have attempted it. Of those that have, Immanuel Velikovsky (*Ages in Chaos: From The Exodus To King Akhnaton*; Doubleday, 1952) and David Rohl (*From Eden to Exile: The Five-Thousand-Year History of the People of the Bible;* Greenleaf Press, 2009) have been foremost amongst those gaining traction with revised and new chronologies that seek to match up Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Aegian, and Levantine histories. See *Patterns of Evidence: Exodus*, and *Patterns of Evidence: The Moses Controversy*, by Timothy P. Mahoney (Thinking Man's Films, 2015 and 2019).

[37] Jandoon, Tuulab, Professor Oron, and his daughter Meela come from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #6* adventure, "Relic" (West End Games). The surname Stryton is new here, as is Myra. The former was named for author George R. Strayton, who wrote a lot of great material for West End Games. Microphone droids come from *Star Wars #48:* "The Third Law" (Marvel).

[38] A lot of lore in one paragraph! Alashan and the "City of Forever" come from the three part *World of Fire* miniseries that ran from issues #107 to #115 (Marvel UK). The idea that Hextrophon and Q9 helped restore the sanity of the guardian that lives there is an untold tale. As with several of the references in this section, these events would have taken place either prior to *Cult Encounters* or right after but before the main action of *Supernatural Encounters*. The idea was that they've done their homework and while they remain necessarily circumspect when they meet the Watcher, as they continue to approach things as scientists, there's a lot they'd already uncovered and suspect to be true, even if Hex is resistant to the conclusion. Zirtran's Anchor was first referenced by in the article of the same name in the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #5* (West End Games). The Temple of the Elders (or Temple of the Ancients) derives from the popular PC/Xbox game *Knights of the Old Republic* (BioWare). Another fantastically mysterious reference is the Pelgrin Oracle, first mentioned in *The Power of the Jedi Sourcebook* (Wizards of the Coast). The Pelgrin were vanished long before even the time of Xim the Despot. The Codex of the Precursors is a reference to the Kathol from the *DarkStryder* campaign (West End Games), and came into the possession of the Aing-Tii. Two other famous people known to have held it are Jacen Solo and Luke Skywalker (*Fate of the Jedi: Omen*, Del Rey). The Codex is known to enhance Force-sensitivity, which may have proved a double-edged sword for Hextrophon. The Codex gets some development later in the story. Pomojema is a god worshipped on Mimban,

from Alan Dean Foster's *Splinter of the Mind's Eye*. The name always struck me as having a tribalistic feel to it, and given how Foster refers to the primitivism of the Coway, it seemed to me that between them and the ages that separated them from the Cosmic Wars, the name Typhojem would have gotten corrupted into Pomojema. It's on Mimban that Hextrophon confirms the connection between the two. Given that *Splinter* is the very first Star Wars Expanded Universe novel, I thought it fitting to give Pomojema a prominent role in the ancient Cosmic Wars. Because Alan Dean Foster explicitly describes Cthulhu (which Chris Sprouse illustrated in the fourth issue of the Dark Horse Comics adaptation of the story), some have interpreted Hextrophon's line as meaning he learned the real name of Pomojema/Typhojem as Cthulhu. "Typhojem" was essentially named after the ancient Greek Typhon, the terrifying serpentine god of Chaos, equivalent to Tiamat, Leviathan, and Lotan of the ancient Mesopotamian/Levantine world, and the name of an occult order started by Crowley-acolyte Kenneth Grant, who is noted in Peter Levenda's book *The Dark Lord*, as tied to the odd synchronicity of Cthulhu and Crowley's "Tutulu," with descriptions of Typhon that match Cthulhu that was written by Crowley on 11/1/07, the very year, month, and day that Lovecraft assigns the discovery of Cthulhu's statue in his short story, "The Call of Cthulhu." Interesting as well is the fact that the Gorantalo word *tuluhu* means "sleep," and given that Cthulhu is known to be sleeping ("not dead but dreaming"), his name may be a derivation.

[39] Bleys Harand is a writer, philosopher, and mentor of Corellia Antilles. He was first referenced in *Geonosis and the Outer Rim Worlds* (Wizards of the Coast). His book, *Travels amid Strange Stars*, was first mentioned *The Essential Guide to Warfare: Author's Cut*. Harand's work is well-known, though his style is often derided as being flowery, which reminded me of how critics often derided Lovecraft and Smith.

[40] The inclusion of elements that seem contradictory or impossible was intended to give Hextrophon's critics additional reasons for having doubts about his work.

[41] The toad-like Chubbits of Aridus come from Archie Goodwin's "The Return of Ben Kenobi" strip (*LA Times*); the insectoid Sikurdian come from *Star Wars #7*: "New Planets, New Perils" (Marvel); the Lepi, popularized by Jaxxon, first appeared in *Star Wars #8*: "Eight for Aduba-3"; the shaggy Gigoran made their film debut in *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (Disney), though their first appearance was in the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #4* story, "It's a Gambler's Life." Hoole is here poking fun at Voren Na'al, who at one time questioned whether the adventures of Han and Chewbacca—as told in the early Marvel series—actually happened. In "The Starhoppers of Aduba-3" (*Star Wars Gamer #4*; Wizards of the Coast), Hextrophon sent Na'al to Aduba-3 to ascertain the details of Han's adventures there. "Starhoppers" plays on the idea of questionable historicity by having Na'al struggle to get a clear picture of things while ultimately affirming the events of the Marvel series. The germ of this idea appears to have come from the unpublished Eric Trautmann article "Eight for Aduba-3" (which seemed to be intended for a later *Star Wars Adventure Journal*). The driving force behind this story, *Cult Encounters*, and my preceding *Gamer* article was to ensure Marvel's place in Star Wars continuity, as I'd had a strong notion of how it all fit together.

[42] Dusk and Heavy Isotope music were first sourced in the *Star Wars Gamer #6* story "Rebel Bass," by Kathy Tyers (Wizards of the Coast). Heavy Isotope is a play on Heavy Metal while Dusk is basically akin to Goth or proto-Metal. Hausen Graf-Well is a portmanteau of Karl Heinrich Graf and Julius Wellhausen, two 19th Century adherents of the Hegelian Dialectic, who first published the documentary hypothesis theory (or Graf–Wellhausen hypothesis). It argues that any change in writing style, anomaly, or anachronism means that another author wrote the material at a later time. The main problem with the documentary hypothesis is overreach. It's not that there couldn't have been older manuscripts upon which the known texts were based or even later editorial emendations, it's that those aren't grounds for refutation of an original author or historicity. Although documentary hypothesis (and the Hegelian Dialectic which it was founded

upon) was discredited and fell out of favor, the views it gave rise to are still taught in universities, which is what inspired its appearance here. For more on this, see the following website: http://unamsanctamcatholicam.com/history/historical-apologetics/79-history/472-deconstructing-documentary-hypothesis.html

[43] Atrisia (Kitel Phard) comes from The Imperial Sourcebook (West End Games). Historian Chen Ming-di come from *The Force Unleashed II* (LucasArts). That work only mentions Ebenmal and Rhador, but since it covers Imperial brutality in its early years, it made sense to include the others. This latter reference caused a bit of a minor disturbance amongst EU purists who dislike what they call the "mixing of canons." Of course, the mention of Lothal doesn't mean that *Rebels* had to have occurred *if you prefer that it didn't*. Yet there are several crossovers between the EU and Disney canon already, not only several books from Fantasy Flight Games and *The Old Republic* MMORPG, but things like *Rogue One* (and, by extension, *Andor*) since *Rogue One: The Ultimate Visual Guide* established that Cassian Andor went by the code name Aach as a senatorial contact, which hearkens to the story "Interlude at Darkknell," from *Tales of the New Republic*.

Chapter 4: Fugitives in Space

[44] Based on the old proverb of the three H's: hunger, humility, and honesty, needed to find truth.

[45] Professor Arn Horada comes from *Star Wars #30*: "A Princess Alone" (Marvel).

[46] The etymological roots of Alashan are more or less accurate, which is what led to this biological connection. "Āla" (or ālas) is the Latin word for "wing," while "han" is an old Norse word for "he" or "him." I cheated and ignored the singular male pronoun aspect to make it "people." The word Alashan has also come to mean "Firstborn Ones" in the S'kytri tongue. The Hexnote here speaks of the bibliographical, external, and internal tests that are part of what's called the historiographical method. These are stringent tests by which historians are able to determine and confirm the authenticity of ancient manuscripts. The S'kytri come from Star Wars Annual #1: "The Long Hunt" (Marvel), and were further explored in my "University of Sanbra Guide to Intelligent Life: The Marvel Series" article in Gamer #1 and Abel G. Peña's SkyeWalkers: A Clone Wars Story.

[47] It always struck me as improbable that Leia would have been able to so quickly translate the ancient writings of a long-vanished civilization, but this tied in perfectly to SE's overarching story.

[48] This fragmented methodology has been traditionally employed in schools in which courses and topics are separated into distinct and compartmentalized disciplines. This not only poorly affects students, but teachers as well, as they become territorial over their subjects and threatened by new and alternate views. In an effort to course correct this, some schools have begun to employ an integrated, interdisciplinary curriculum in which the unity of subject matters and concepts are shown to be tied to each other and real life, demonstrating the meaningful and relevant connections between them while allowing for a deeper and more profound understanding of the material. See *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation*, by Heidi Hayes Jacobs (1989).

[49] Yman Veli'kosyk and Rol Aviid are anagrams of Immanuel Velikovsky and David Rohl. Velikovsky was a psychoanalyst, psychiatrist, and independent scholar who wrote a series of books proposing a revised chronology of ancient Egypt, Greece, Israel, and other Near-Eastern cultures. His most famous work, *Worlds in Collision,* was met with such severe hostility from the science community (universities denied him a forum to debate his ideas while scientists threatened the publisher that they would pull their books) that the term "Velikovsky Effect" was coined to describe the gatekeeping, ideological bias, and resistance to alternate ideas amongst the establishment. Although Hex started off as part of orthodoxy, he's now in the Velikovsky mold, castigated by his contemporaries as a heretic.

[50] I've found interesting meanings in the etymological origins of certain names, so I try to use etymology wherever possible, as it lends verisimilitude and can lead to interesting connections and story ideas. The meaning of "Kwa," for example, is a bit of a cheat, but one worth making. The author likely was riffing off of "qua" and "qui," which are Latin for "who, what, which." But

other language groups produced different meanings: “Kwa” has the Caledonian meaning of “sky,” which, of course, has Celestial associations, while “cua” has Spanish and Vietnamese derivations that refer to a “criminal” or “low-class person,” with the latter language group having an additional derivation of something “sawed off” or amputated. Based on the development of the Kwa in *Star Wars* literature and SE, I determined they were a Firstborn people who had cut themselves off and made themselves lesser due to their prior criminal actions.

[51] The Mindharp comes from *Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu*, by L. Neill Smith (Del Rey). The Obroan Institute’s incursions come from *The Essential Chronology* (Del Rey).

[52] The name of the Shimholt homeworld, Kar’a’katok, was first referenced in “Aliens in the Empire, Part 1: Hierarchy of Power” (Hyperspace), but it originally comes from *Supernatural Encounters*, which I’d shared with Abel during his composition of that article. The Shimholt species first appeared in *Star Wars #69*: “Death in the City of Bone” (Marvel), in the character of the Suprema, ruler of Mandalore. His name, Ampotem Za, is my invention.

Chapter 5: Secrets of the Keeper

[53] Ophidian Grotesques were first named in *Fate of the Jedi: Vortex* (Del Rey).

[54] The Keeper and her children come from the *very first* Star Wars Expanded Universe story, Marvel’s *Pizzazz* magazine serial, “The Keeper’s World,” by Roy Thomas and Archie Goodwin, which ran from 10/77 to 6/78. The story was ahead of its time for Star Wars lore in terms of: a) the ruins of a mysterious, long-vanished advanced race with a nonviolent ethos, b) a super-intelligent A.I. guardian, c) bio-engineered life to protect the world. All of these concepts continued to play out in the EU in various ways, which led me to tie them together to the never-before-explored ancient conflict known as *the Cosmic Wars*—a name that comes from *Star Wars #84*: “Seoul Searching” but a concept that derives from the *Pizzazz* story. Osseria and its people, the Osserians, were never named until SE. The name is a play on L. Frank Baum’s Oz series, another sprawling universe with numerous stories and contributors. Just three years prior, Thomas penned adaptations of the first two Oz books for Marvel. The connection to the Ossians and Ossaru is not incidental.

[55] “Dread Discovery” is one of the chapter titles of the *Pizzazz* arc. You’ll find several of these strewn about this section. This was just me having fun with the various titles and paying homage to the first new *Star Wars* story after *A New Hope*. *Pizzazz* was extremely rare in the early ‘90s, and in the days before eBay and omnibus collections, it took me what seemed like a lifetime to find these magazines.

[56] Using one’s wits instead of violence to solve conflicts is not explored enough in entertainment. *Star Wars* has an interesting history with this subject, which I explored in the essay “War and Peace: Star Wars and the Myth of Redemptive Violence,” in *A More Civilized Age* (Sequart).

[57] The Kima, from *Star Wars Galaxies*, is a horned lionlike being, while the Korrina, from the animated *Ewoks* episode “Asha,” is more wolflike, though with a similar build as the Kima.

[58] Here, Hextrophon puts forth a date that everyone can agree with. The departure of the Killiks in the face of some cosmic threat was said to have occurred roughly between 35,000 and 30,000 BBY, around the same period of time in which *The Essential Atlas* claims the Celestials departed the galaxy, the Tho Yor begin gathering Force-sensitives, and the Kwa begin teaching the Force to various races, including the Rakata. Hextrophon indicates that the Twilight Wars began some time prior to these events—of which they’re connected—around 36,500 BBY.

[59] Le Loup, a perfect name in homage to my friend and translator, Alban LeLoup.

Chapter 6: Mistress of Fusai

[60] Mistress Mnemos is the creation of author Russ Manning, who wrote the earliest Star Wars newspaper strips, since collected in IDW’s *Star Wars: The Classic Newspaper Comics Vol. 1* and Marvel’s *Legends Epic Collection: The Newspaper Strips Vol. 1.* Mistress Mnemos debuted in 1979 in the very first strip, “Gambler’s World,” and went on to appear in two others (she’s also mentioned in *Star Wars Gamer #4*’s “The Starhoppers of Aduba-3”). Intelligent beyond most and

with a personality to match, the fact that the Alliance has her working as a recording device is like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. I was glad she survived the Yuuzhan Vong.

[61] The Old Ones were referenced in the fourth and final *Darkstryder* Campaign series, called *Endgame*. The terms Kathol, Cthol, and Old Ones are nods to the Cthulhu Mythos of H.P. Lovecraft, which brings us back to the *SW* tales of Alan Moore and Alan Dean Foster.

[62] Otherspace, the Charon, and Charr Ontee are from the West End Games RPG adventure books *Otherspace, Otherspace II: Invasion,* and *Endgame.* It always surprised me that with an entire bizarre realm hidden beyond Realspace no author or editor thought to develop it for a larger storyline in the mainstream series, but I think that goes to show just how many wildly creative stories the EU was exploring, and how open to the imaginative process Lucasfilm was.

[63] The Nelori Marauders come from the *Tales of the Jedi Companion* (West End Games).

[64] The idea of the Shimholt's most valuable treasure being the records of their history was a riff on the song, "One Tin Soldier," by Dennis Lambert and Brian Potter, performed by The Original Caste and popularized by Jinx Dawson in the 1971 film *Billy Jack.* In it, the warlike Valley People invade and slaughter the peaceful Mountain People to acquire their buried treasure, which turns out to be the words "Peace on Earth" inscribed on a stone.

[65] Hathkhalid Sud, Psamtiken Re, and Ampotem Za were names I invented to give the Shimholt an ancient Egyptian feel, as I'd developed Kar'a'katok to have pyramids, ziggurats, and old secrets. Zeta Magnus comes from *SkyeWalkers*, and was based on the unproduced 1986 toy-line from Kenner called "The Epic Continues," which would have continued the EU storyline after the end of the *Marvel Star Wars* series with the threat of evil genetics master Atha Prime. After Bill Smith canonized the droids and vehicles in "The Battle of Cadinth" (*Star Wars Galaxy #2;* Topps), Peña canonized the basic premise in his story, intending Zeta Magnus to be Atha Prime.

Chapter 7: The Hellhoop

[66] Attahox, the Hellhoop, Exalted Torgaigne, Cult of Five, Wutzek, and the horrors that Han and Leia go through come from the legendary Alan Moore story, "The Pandora Effect."

[67] R'khemas Professor Misqa Tonique was first mentioned in *CE*. An overt homage to August Derleth's publishing company Arkham House and Lovecraft's fictional Miskatonik University.

[68] Lumiya likely got her copy of the *Book of Anger* (first mentioned in *Dark Empire;* Dark Horse) from the Prophets of the Dark Side. Hex got his from Luke. The information in *Cult Encounters* about the Jedi Order's history with the Pius Dea and Order of the Terrible Glare would presumably be of a sensitive enough nature that he'd want to present his findings to Luke in person. The Quintarad in the Void of Aogros comes from *The Essential Guide to Warfare: Author's Cut*; the Demonsgate is from the third book in *The DarkStryder Campaign*, *The Kathol Rift*.

[69] The Endor Gate is from *Droids #4*: "Lost in Time" (Star/Marvel), first named in "Endor and the Moddell Sector" (*Star Wars Gamer #9;* Wizards of the Coast), after it was retconned in *The Droids Re-Animated* (Star Wars Blog), as the place where C-3PO and R2-D2 went back in time. The Wizards of the Night Spirit (*Ewoks*: Season 2: "Night of the Stranger") were one of the few scary elements in the *Ewoks* animated series, which I later came to enjoy, as it's very lore-heavy. It would have been considerably stronger had it not been subjected to heavy studio interference by ABC's Standards and Practices which regressively controlled U.S. television in the 1980s.

Chapter 8: The Testimony of Cindel Towani

[70] Cindel Towani was the main protagonist of *Caravan of Courage: An Ewok Adventure* (ABC) and *Ewoks: The Battle for Endor* (ABC). Noa Briqualon, the Gorax, the Sanyassan Marauders, and witch Charal (later retconned as a Nightsister) all come from these films. In *The Black Fleet Crisis: Tyrant's Test* (Bantam-Spectra), Cindel is shown to have become a journalist.

[71] All the references to Ewoks that aren't original to this story come from the two seasons of the *Ewoks* animated series, the 14-issue *Ewoks* comic-book series (Marvel's Star Comics), *Ewoks Annual* (Marvel UK), the eight short Spanish *Ewoks* comics (MyComyc) translated by Abel Peña, and the German *Ewoks* comic-magazines, translated to English by Thomas Rathausky (which will

soon be available.) *Legacy of the Force: Fury* and *Fate of the Jedi: Outcast* both feature scenes referencing these. In the former, an "entertainment broadcast in which Ewoks spoke Basic and befriended shipwrecked little girls" plays on the viewscreen, while Ben Skywalker sings with a voice "as high and ridiculous as that of an animated Ewok in a children's broadcast" in the latter.

[72] The idea of Duros not believing in Humans comes from *Monsters and Aliens from George Lucas* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc.). The B'rknaa are from *Droids: The Kalarba Adventures #4* (Dark Horse); Mount Sorrow is from *Ewoks #7*: "The Perilous Laughing Spell" (Star Comics)/ The B'rknaa retcon of Mount Sorrow comes directly from a retcon by Aaron Mercer.

[73] Pollo Tipn, comes from *The Thrawn Trilogy Sourcebook* (West End Games). He'd explored the Kathol Sector and could corroborate Towani's discoveries. This helped to balance the room by having several who were enthused by the material they were hearing, either because it corroborated findings of their own or because they're open to the possibilities.

[74] Trobbits come from the short-lived space fantasy animated series, *Blackstar* (Filmation-CBS, 1981), written by EU author Michael Reaves along with Marc Scott Dicree and Tom Ruegger. Reaves brought Sagar and Blackstar's Wheelworld into continuity in *Death Star* (Del Rey).

[75] Most of this comes from *The DarkStryder Campaign* (West End Games). The name Darth Karnage was first introduced, without elaboration, by Leland Chee in *Darth Names and the Darth Who winner revealed* (Star Wars: Blogs). Here, the name is given to the previously unidentified Dark Jedi who enslaved the Kathol and caused the Kathol Rift Disaster. The event being part of the Third Great Schism is made here; the similarity between the Vultar Cataclysm, triggered by the Dark Jedi of the Third Great Schism, and the previously undated Kathol Rift Disaster was too neat a link to pass up. The Third Great Schism was revealed to be influenced by the Sith in *The Jedi Path: A Manual for Students of the Force* (becker&mayer!).

[76] *The DarkStryder Campaign* contains contradictions between its third book, *The Kathol Rift,* and its fourth book *Endgame,* as to whether Halbret was the name of the male Dark Jedi or the female Jedi Knight who fought him. That's reconciled here, with *Endgame's* depiction of Halbret as the female Jedi affirmed, and *essence transference* explaining the discrepancy in Kathol legends.

[77] The name of historian Veste Gesdol is a Tuckerism of top-tier contributor Steven Dolges.

[78] Tana does actually mean "land" in several languages. I then added the Turkish definition of "tan" which means "twilight," to create "Twilight Land," or "enchanted land" as Tipn put it.

[79] In *Book of Sith,* Mother Talzin describes Dathomirian magic as working on principles of "spirit ichor" and ties it to Dathomir's spirit deities. This is similar to the description of Ta-Ree energy in *DarkStryder*, with the implication that Dathomir possesses its own amplified Force energy localized to the planet and that the Witches are directly channeling its essence, much as the natives of Kathol were channeling the spiritual energy of the Precursors. While this might be due to the Kwa's manipulations of the Infinity Gates in times past, dark magic seems to better connect to the realm of the Anti-Force. Of course, both may be in play. The retcon partly explains why Talzin's powers are described as being weaker when away from Dathomir (since she is an ancient spirit, tethering herself to a nexus of dark magic like Dathomir makes sense) in *The Clone Wars*, and why she might have had to rely on the Living Sphere, an orb created by the Nightsisters and filled with the siphoned Living Force of sacrificed Dagoyan Force-users, when on Bardotta. Similarly, the unusual potency of Sith sorcery, largely prevalent when the ancient Sith were confined to the spatial disturbance of the Stygian Caldera, would be explained by it representing its connection to the Charnel Worlds and the channeled essence of evil Sith spirits of old, which is consistent with *Book of Sith* describing spells as giving voice to the sorcerers who went before.

[80] Tamaab Moolis comes from *The New Jedi Order: Agents of Chaos I: Hero's Trial* (Del Rey).

[81] Wolam Tser, first appeared in *The New Jedi Order: Enemy Lines I: Rebel Dream* (Del Rey).

[82] Seldona accessed this section from the part marked: "This section accessed and read earlier."

[83] Since the Endor gas giant was originally called Tana, I wanted there to be a reason for the system to have later been called Endor and I liked the idea of the word Indur sounding akin to "endure," which is the trait that defines them. It also has the feel "indigenous" and "indoor."
[84] There was no Endor Holocaust, regardless of what Curtis Saxton thinks. ;)
[85] The Father Tree is from *The Adventures of Teebo: A Tale of Magic and Suspense* (Random House). The Tree of Light is from season 1, episode 6: "The Tree of Light," of *Ewoks* (ABC).
[86] "Wist" is from the Old English-Saxon word *witan*: "to know," "to be wise," and "wise men."
[87] The Ewok stories in the films, animated series, comic-books, and children's books presented the Endor moon as a magical world. I see no discrepancy here. Ewoks media tended to skew to a younger audience. Nevertheless, it wasn't hard to give the Ewoks stories a space opera sheen to make them more consistent with Star Wars. This was accomplished, in large part, by adapting it to the pattern established in the EU, e.g., the Alashan and Kathol, amongst others. As regards the names, all but the following come from earlier sources: The Lizard Warriors had no species name, so I christened them the Gharial after the crocodile. The Iceheads had no name, but given that they mimic the actions of the Winkies in MGM's *The Wizard of Oz*, I named them Wynken. The Underwater Dwellers had no name. Dagan is a reference to the wicked Phoenician fish-god (aka. Dagon), whom H.P. Lovecraft put to good use in *The Shadow over Innsmouth* in which the residents of that city slowly turn into beings called Deep Ones, who are similar in appearance to the Underwater Dwellers. The alternate name Gill-Men is a reference to the *Creature from the Black Lagoon* and its sequels, which the Underwater Dwellers also resemble. The Persta are Norky's unnamed species, as indicated on the model sheet. Andowyne fairies are a reference to *Willow*, while the Grudakk being one of the Xaczhick is a reference to the creature from *Star Wars #50*: "The Crimson Forever" (Marvel). The Taltorians is the name given here for the first time for Bothel's species from the Ewoks animated series episode, "Malani the Warrior."

Book II: Journey into Otherspace

[88] The first quote is from the opening narration of *Heavy Metal* (Columbia Pictures, 1981). The Celestial Record was first mentioned in *Edge of the Empire: Suns of Fortune* (FFG).
[89] The second quote is attributed to E'ch-Pi-El, which is the in-universe Tuckerization for H.P. Lovecraft (HPL) that his circle of friends used in their stories back in the 1930s. The quote comes from the opening two stanzas of the H.P. Lovecraft poem, "Nemesis."

Chapter 9: The Graveyard

[90] The Rebel Blockade Runner was ubiquitous in the early *Star Wars* Marvel series, and I wanted the aesthetic tie to that era but with some alterations to make the ship Hex's own. The reference to Luke's lost Blockade Runner is from *Star Wars #11*: "Star Search" (Marvel). Warlord Xim is from Brian Daley's *Han Solo and the Lost Legacy* (Del Rey) and explored in the *Han Solo and the Corporate Sector Sourcebook* (West End Games) and "The Despotica" epic (Hyperspace).
[91] Aitha protein drink: a dumb joke based on old U.S. television commercials for the tomato-juice drink V8, akin to similar dumb jokes from L. Neill Smith's *Lando Calrissian* trilogy. That Cuenyne seems to recognize the reference—which seems unlikely—is funny to me, as well.
[92] The *Eclipse* is the flagship of the reborn Emperor in the *Dark Empire* series (Dark Horse).
[93] I had fun with the various debates that Q9 and Hextrophon have. They're a reminder of a time when companions could discuss, debate, and even argue differing views and still maintain a civil tongue and friendship afterwards. Q9's reference to Stormtrooper helmets is from "Tilotny Throws a Shape."
[94] The EU has employed the real-world terms of psychopathy and sociopathy. Because the galaxy is "far, far away," writers are always cautious about references and words that may be too Earthian. Despite that, Lucas and the EU authors incorporated numerous examples of things that are very Earth-specific, which was something that SE set out to explore and make sense of.
[95] This debate is a reference to the crossover in *Droids #4* and *Ewoks #10*. In it, C-3PO goes back in time to visit the Ewoks. The author, David Manak, or the editor made a mistake in writing that

he went back 100 years. That time-span makes no sense internally or contextually since the Ewoks are not that long-lived nor does that series take place a century in the past. He *likely* meant 10 years, but even that's a stretch. What he could've done was skip the time-travel aspect entirely and just had C-3PO visit the planet, since *Droids* takes place before *Return of the Jedi* anyway. For this reason, I'm taking Q9's side of the debate.

[96] These references go back to tie-in media and PSAs that came out between 1977 and 1984.

Chapter 10: The Dead City

[97] *MedStar II: Jedi Healer* (Del Rey) has a restaurant on Coruscant named Zothique, which Michael Reaves and Steve Perry named after the Zothique story-cycle of Clark Ashton Smith. Ililot, Ojhal, and Yululun are gods from there. Late-period Urthha is potentially the setting for any Dying Earth stories that one might see fit to include, such as William Hope Hodgson's *The Night Land* and Jack Vance's stories. Of course, *potential* is the underlying word. References do not dictate inclusion (out of respect for fans who prefer a less *multiversal* saga).

Chapter 11: Dialogue in Darkness

[98] The Symatrum League and Mechanical Liberation Front come from *Cynabar's Fantastic Technology: Droids* (West End Games).

[99] Some of the basic foundations of the galaxy are mysteries, e.g., "Where do humans come from?" There are in-universe debates over the answer to that question. Lest anyone say this is because Star Wars was not well-conceived, these mysteries and debates are still occuring right here in our own world.

[100] Derived from the Ancient Greek word, *thrónos*. That it's an earth word at all is discussed later.

[101] Urthha was first mentioned for the word Earth in *Monsters and Aliens from George Lucas* (Abrams Books), and it's a great word. See notes #115 and #152 for more on Earth.

[102] The quote from Manaxa is from *Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Warfare: Author's Cut, Part 2—Ancient Coruscant* (Star Wars Blog), which provides an answer to the very question.

[103] The Servo Seven come from *The Scavenger's Guide to Droids* (Wizards of the Coast).

[104] It was Mistress Mnemos, from Russ Manning's 1978 newspaper strips, who first put forth the idea of 10th Degree humans without any explanation. This was my attempt to provide that. I leave it to others to figure out the sidereal era dates!

[105] The droids of Ronyards are from Alan Moore's "Rust Never Sleeps" (*The Empire Strikes Back Monthly #156;* Marvel UK). A shrine to the Maker on Paladez is from the *Star Wars Adventurer's Journal: Fantastic Technology: Professional Gadgets and Personal Gear* (Brian L. Bird)

Chapter 12: Labyrinth of a Lost Race

[106] Myrmin was first used in *The Crystal Star* (Bantam-Spectra). Nightshrikes come from *Marvel Star Wars #35*: "Dark Lord's Gambit." Zelosian zombies come from *Planets of the Galaxy: Volume 2* (West End Games).

[107] The "Nine Ice Worlds" is an expression first used in *X-Wing: Mercy Kill* (Del Rey). I just like its odd juxtaposition to the Nine Hells and suggest they are one and the same.

[108] The Ssi-ruuk come from *The Truce at Bakura* (Bantam-Spectra). The Kitonak from the Max Rebo Band was identified as such in *Galaxy Guide 4: Alien Races* (West End Games). The blue, birdlike Nediji come from *MedStar I: Battle Surgeons* (Del Rey).

[109] Zakuul was first explored in *The Old Republic: Knights of the Fallen Empire* and *Knights of the Eternal Throne* expansions (BioWare/EA).

[110] The Four Precepts come from the Buddhist concept of the Five Precepts, which are five moral codes that should govern a person's life. They include prohibitions against: 1. harming living beings, 2. taking what is not given, 3. sexual misconduct, 4. lying or gossip, and 5. taking intoxicating substances. Given that the story was developing a cosmology based on the number 4, which synchronistically incorporated the title of the *Visionaries* short story "The Fourth Precept," I eliminated the fifth, but established the rest as the basic moral guidelines in the galaxy, as based on the worldview of Lucas. "The Fourth Precept" is a short comic-book story included in *Star*

Wars Visionaries (Dark Horse), conceived and illustrated by Lucasfilm concept artist Stephen Martiniere. It appears to depict an ancient cosmic conflict between light and dark. Several fans have postulated that it may represent the defining moment of creation. Here, it's presented as an in-universe work of art that presents justification for the theater of perpetual conflict between equal-and-opposing entities, akin to the cosmic and moral dualism of Orphism, Zoroastrianism, Pythagoreanism, Hermeticism, and Manichaeism, which derived from the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians and came to influence Gnostism, Theosophy, and the New Age movement. The Naboo poet Omar Berenko comes from *Star Wars: The Complete Locations* (DK Publishing). Some thought he might be the creator of *The Fourth Precept* due to his disturbing but visionary poem, "Defense of Naboo."

[111] The poet Felloux comes from *The New Essential Chronology* (Del Rey). The Croke writer Asenec, whose works were often banned for being sickening and offensive, comes from *Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Warfare: Author's Cut, Part 3* — "Xim the Despot." Ithorian poet Soshu Londahl comes from the online *Star Wars: Living Force* RPG campaign adventure, "Life's Memories," (Wizards of the Coast). His poetry is a reflection of the dualistic, nihilist worldview, which made him a good candidate for the in-universe *Fourth Precept*.

[112] Cuenyne is expressing the concept behind the "Myth of Redemptive Violence," a term coined by Walter Wink in several of his works, e.g., *The Powers That Be* (Doubleday), in which he demonstrates how the ancient Babylonian myth has, through multifarious ways, continued to be the dominant myth of modern society. In my essay "War and Peace: Star Wars and the Myth of Redemptive Violence," I discuss its connection with *Star Wars* (*A More Civilized Age;* Sequart)

[113] The Liberty Builders and their ties to other secret societies are new to this story. They're essentially a fictionalized equivalent of the Freemasons in much the same way that the Lumenatus Club, from *The Old Republic* MMORPG, is a reference to the Illuminati. The Order of the Canted Circle comes from *Galaxywide NewsNet* in *Adventure Journal* #9. The Apex Society comes from "The Mask of Darth Nihilus" in *The Unknown Regions* (Wizards of the Coast). The Mecrosa Order comes from the *Lords of the Expanse* boxed set (West End Games).

[114] Deriving from Pythagoreanism, Hermeticism, and Gnostic schools of thought, secret societies often express symbols with both exoteric and esoteric meanings, the former are more palatable to outsiders and lower-level members; the latter are only revealed to high-ranking members.

Chapter 13: Sigils in the Underworld

[115] The idea of our Earth being part of the *Star Wars* universe was always going to be controversial, with some wanting Star Wars to be completely removed, and others seeing the possibility of it right in the opening crawl. While I understand the arguments of the former, I defer to Lucas' own conception. Not only does the opening crawl indicate a connection but so do the innumerable Earth-based references, fauna, flora, and languages (see "The Written World," by John Hazlett, published on Starwars.com's Hyperspace). There's also the fact that Lucas created the Journal of the Whills as the means by which we—here on Earth—know of events in the galaxy far, far away. Add in the EU and references to *E.T.,* and the connections are explicit. With that in mind, it was interesting to have Humans be the aliens in the galaxy. Anti-Earth fans can take comfort in knowing that our plane of existence is still far, far away in another dimension.

[116] This establishes the differences between Q9, who is more cynical, and Hextrophon, being Human himself, who is more understanding. I enjoy their debates.

[117] The Solomonites and the "Lord of the Force" concept come directly from Michael Kevin Brennan's Miltonian poem *The Godform Assumption of Starcrow the Wise*, which is on: http://www.starwarstimeline.net/Godform%Assumption.htm.

Chapter 14: Tales of the Watcher

[118] The chapter title was done in homage to Marvel UK, as British readers will recall that the old *Star Wars Weeklies* had various back-up stories, one of the earliest being *Tales of the Watcher*, which featured science-fiction shorts from the 1950s and '60s.

[119] Raich comes from the animated *Ewoks* episode of the same name, written by Michael Reaves who went on to write the *MedStar* duology and *Death Star* novel, in which he references the creature as the "Raitch." The Cavern Monster comes from *Marvel Star Wars Annual #2*.

[120] I'm generally not fond of the use of anagrams (called Tuckerisms when it refers to the scrambling of personal names), but if they're good enough for Philip K. Dick, H.P. Lovecraft, and Robert Bloch, then they're good enough for me. Archon-Ood and Asmoth-Yor are, respectively, Archie Goodwin and Roy Thomas, the first authors of the Expanded Universe.

[121] Feral droids on Coruscant are mentioned in *Coruscant Nights I: Jedi Twilight* (Del Rey).

[122] Areana was named after my cousin's daughter, Arianna. After having misspelled her name in the acknowledgments of my first book, I was glad to have at least gotten the correct spelling here.

[123] Garham's-on-the-Downstream is from *X-wing: Starfighters of Adumar* (Bantam-Spectra).

Chapter 15: Keeper of the Secrets

[124] Angels were first mentioned by Anakin Skywalker in *The Phantom Menace*. Their appearance came in *The Clone Wars: Season 1*: Episode 18: "Mystery of a Thousand Moons" (Cartoon Network). They were first identified as Diathim in *Geonosis and the Outer Rim Worlds* (Wizards of the Coast). The construction of the word *Diathim* follows that of other spirit entities in ancient Hebrew cosmology, such as Malakim, Seraphim, Cherubim, and Ophannim; the "-im" designates plurality, while "Diath" comes from the Latin *Dias* (the feminine plural of *dius*), meaning "godly, heavenly, divine." Lucas and Filoni portrayed them as angelic beings with a measure of physicality, which is akin to biblical portrayals of *Elohim* (spirit beings, some of which are angels) when manifest on Earth. In line with their angelic association, some of their numbers fell to become the underground Maelibi demons. Given the suffix of that word denotes a plural or singular designation (Maelibus is the singular form), that leaves *mael*, which means "prince" in Welsh, but "servant" or "slave" in Old Irish. *Mael* is also a variant of *Mal*, which, of course, means "affliction," "evil," and "illness." Additionally, Maelibi has a similar construction to *Iblis*, the Arabic word for "Devil" and "Satan."

[125] The Great Creator is the title used for the Tuhgri's god in "Galaxy's Edge": *The Kathol Outback*. Fossah comes from David Michael Wieger and Terry Witlach's *The Katurran Odyssey* (Simon & Schuster). The Whills are the first race ever mentioned in *Star Wars*, appearing in the introduction of Alan Dean Foster's novelization. Lucas conceived of the Ancient Order of the Whills as immortal creators of the Journal of the Whills (*Star Wars: The Annotated Screenplays*). In conversation with James Cameron in *James Cameron's Story of Science Fiction*, Lucas indicated that in his story outline for what the sequel trilogy was intended to be: "There's this world of creatures that operate differently than we do. I call them the Whills. And the Whills are the ones who actually control the universe. They feed off the Force… We're vessels for them. And the conduit is the Midi-chlorians. The Midi-chlorians are the ones that communicate with the Whills. The Whills, in a general sense, they are the Force… the whole concept of how things happen was laid out completely from [the beginning] to the end. But I never got to finish. I never got to tell people about it." The Midichlorians are the means by which the Whills communicate, not through direct speech but rather through conscience and feelings by trying to guide the actions of people towards growth. In *The Making of Star Wars*, Lucas said, "The Journal of the Whills came from the fact that you 'will' things to happen." In *Star Wars: The Annotated Screenplays*, he added: "Originally, I was trying to have the story be told by somebody else; there was somebody watching this whole story and recording it, somebody probably *wiser than the mortal players* in the actual events." Lucas further clarified his concept in *Star Wars Archives 1999-2005* as an advanced race of microscopic beings who serve as symbionts with the midichlorians to generate life and the Living Force in service to the Cosmic Force (which he says is a metaphor for God). They're the wheel that drives the will of the Maker to sentient beings, akin to the incarnate Holy Spirit of New Testament metaphysics.

[126] Exploring deeper into how Lucas' conception of the Cosmic Force fits with the EU's Celestials, it was helpful to look at not only interviews but his larger body of work, what Dave Filoni referred to as the Lucasverse (https://www.starwars.com/video/questions-answered-nass-orphne-and-willow-the-clone-wars) particularly *Willow*, *Strange Magic*, and *Twice Upon a Time*. In *Willow*, the fairies speak of "the Will of the Way." EU fans know the Way was an ancient term for the Force, and the Sacred Way religion was first referenced in issue #7 of the Marvel *Star Wars* series in 1978. Lucas' original concept involved having "the story told by somebody else; there was somebody watching this whole story and recording it, somebody probably wiser than the mortal players…" Somebody *wiser* than the *mortal* players who could *will* things to happen, is, therefore, an *immortal* worker of magic. In keeping with these supernatural concepts that Lucas developed, the Celestials serve the function of both fairies and angels, and is the reason for the nomenclature. Osiarch comes from the Ousiarch ("Lord of Being"), borrowed partly from C.S. Lewis' Oyarsa. Valdilar is also closely related to Lewis' Eldila and J.R.R. Tolkien's Valar. Agioiy is Hebrew for "Holy Ones." Malak'im (and its variant spellings) is an ancient word in numerous languages for "divine messenger," often translated as angel. The *Bene-Elyon* is a variant of *Bene-Elohim*: "Sons of God;" *Ággelos* is the ancient Greek word for "angels," Those Who Dwell Beyond the Veil is the term for the deities of the Aing-Tii, as revealed in *Fate of the Jedi: Omen* (Del Rey).

[127] Skyriver was first mentioned as the name of the galaxy in the Nagai storyline at the end of the original Marvel Star Wars series. *The Essential Atlas* then indicated that this was how they referred to the galaxy. Samûnaru (or *Šamûnāru*) is Akkadian for "sky" and "river"; I like how the word rolls off the tongue and the way it has both an Asian and Native American feel to it.

[128] The Suns of Light was taken from *The War of the Suns of Light Against the Suns of Darkness* found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls in Qumran Cave 1. The Guardians of the Dawn term is original to this story, as is the First Stars and the Council of the Divine, all three of which were inspired by Divine Council theology http://www.thedivinecouncil.com).

[129] Fāta (singular *Fatum*) is one of the words from which term "fairies" derives (the Persian *Peri* is another); Tün-dérek (singular tündér) is the Hungarian term for fairy. As with the Diathim, they're an aspect of the Celestials who have as their commission the job of helping to guide the Elder Races.

[130] The Agasami come from "La Caída del Imperio Agasami," in *Troll* #14 (1988). Saint Syas, Zotakh, and the vanished Zendar people come from *Descartes Les Supplement* #3 (1992).

[131] The Malevolum is a new term. The Malevoiy are from the Lucas-Claremont *Willow* sequel, *The Chronicles of the Shadow War*. The Fairfolk are from *Star Wars 3D* #3 (Blackthorne Publishing). The Yvala is from the C.L. Moore story of the same name. The Transuranae is from Leigh Brackett's story *The Big Jump*.

[132] Time Dilation: Just as time flows at a different pace in the Mortis Monolith (*Fate of the Jedi: Apocalypse*), so too does time flow differently in Skyriver and the Primary Universe, supporting the events of the latter as having happened both "A long time ago" and "somewhere in this space, this may all be happening right now," from the first trailer. This time dilation is part of the construction of the Skyriver Universe by the Celestials who designed it. Other secondary universes might have different time dilations… or none at all (with time running the same as Earth-time). Time-dilation harmonizes with how Lucas conceived things. In J.W. Rinzler's *The Complete Making of Indiana Jones* (Del Rey), Lucas stated that "time in the other dimension is different from ours, so an hour to them is like a hundred or a thousand years to us." Additionally, Lucas noted that the SW galaxy in relation to our own is past or future: "I do want to establish that it takes place in another galaxy, far away from us and in another time. A time that could have been—maybe somewhere, something… it takes place in a time maybe in the past, maybe in the future… I want to try to get the thing out of the science fiction thing and more into a fantasy kind of thing." The "A Long Time Ago" opening was, thus, intended to convey the idea of what Lucas

called a “fairy tale”: “I wanted to take it out of the spacey science-fiction thing, and turn it more into 'Once upon a time, in faraway land' rather than, in a different galaxy.” http://therealcharleslippincott.blogspot.com/2015/11/the-alan-dean-foster-interviews.html

[133] The elasticity of the Star Wars galaxy is here explained. I like the way the World between Worlds provides a basis for time-travel and other anomalous potentialities in the *Star Wars* universe with a universally built-in apparatus, built-in disinclination (which is why time-travel is so uncommon), and a clear link to the Mortis Gods. While the World between Worlds comes from *Star Wars Rebels*: Season 4: “Wolves and a Door” and “A World between Worlds,” creator Dave Filoni acknowledged borrowing the concept from C.S. Lewis’ Wood between the Worlds from *The Magician’s Nephew* (Harper-Collins, 1955), which is a portal to other worlds and times. Whether you accept *Rebels* or not, the idea of time-travel was first introduced into *Star Wars* in 1986 with the Star/Marvel *Droids* comic-book, and was picked up again by West End Games, Dark Horse Comics, Del Rey, and others. While I tend to downplay many of the time-travel references (e.g., the aforementioned *Droids/Ewoks* crossover), as I think it should be rare, by the same token, having a framework like the World Between Worlds helps make it comprehensible, while still leaving things mysterious and cosmic.

Chapter 16: From the Crypts of Memory

[134] The idea of the Kwa teaching the Rakata and subsequently being deceived by them comes from *Dawn of the Jedi: The Prisoner of Bogan #4* (Dark Horse).

[135] One of the underriding themes of the *Star Wars* series is that it’s ultimately love not violent conflict that saves the galaxy. We see this in Luke’s love for his father and the way in which Anakin returns that love by sacrificing his life to overthrow the Emperor. Hextrophon has, for years, seen through the lens of the Alliance and resents the idea that their part in the violence was unjustified and may have contributed to greater suffering. I think both sides make valid arguments. Incidentally, the Watcher shouldn’t know this information, as her companion and source of knowledge about the galaxy, was destroyed prior to the events of *Return of the Jedi*.

[136] This is a direct quotation of the ending line of the 1912 poem “From the Crypts of Memory,” by Clark Ashton Smith, from *Ebony and Crystal: Poems in Verse and Prose* (*The Complete Poetry and Translations of Clark Ashton Smith: Volume 1: The Abyss Triumphant;* Hippocampus Press, 2012). It can also be read for free here: http://www.eldritchdark.com. While there are several older, real-world quotes that were requoted, repurposed, and reattributed in different forms in SE, I wanted the Watcher to make a direct quote from the original.

[137] That the Watcher’s Children provided aid to Luke and Leia (*Pizzazz* #8 and #9) seemed hinted at in that story and makes sense given that Luke had all of a few days of training from Obi-Wan and that even Vader is astounded at his abilities in the times he confronts him prior to *TESB*.

[138] In my earliest conception, the Watcher just beams them onto their ship. This scene was added later in the development of the story to go along with the Jaun Raza illustration, which has Typhojem present along with Waru and his companions, a Shadow Being, Hextrophon and Q9. Of course, Typhojem is not the sole being of his kind (in the Cthulhu Mythos, there are Cthylla and Kthanid for starters).

Chapter 17: The Horror from Beyond

[139] I love Vonda McIntyre’s *The Crystal Star* (Bantam-Spectra). Though it’s more appreciated now, upon its initial release, fans didn’t have glowing opinions of it. I suspect it was hampered by coming out prior to Barbara Hambly’s *Planet of Twilight*, in which Luke lost Callista, an event that explains his depression in *The Crystal Star.* Also, the bizarre entities present in Alan Moore’s stories (reprinted in *Devilworlds*) help Waru fit better in the context of the universe.

[140] Dark Jedi Kueller wore a Hendanyn Death Mask in Kristine Kathryn Rusch’s *The New Rebellion* (Bantam-Spectra). Malmourral first appeared in a season 6 episode of *The Clone Wars*.

[141] The Colossus Wasps are a fascinating species (*Tales of the Jedi #4*; Dark Horse Comics), and a retcon to a problem introduced in the *Tales of the Jedi Companion,* and later repeated in my

Gamer #1 article, in which the Onderon system was said to be in the Stenness Node. This is contrary to what the issue itself states about it being on the other side of the galaxy from Stenness. This also explains why the Onderon system is also called the Japrael System. The term "Hymenoptera" was used by C-3PO in *The Joiner King*, Book 1 of the *Dark Nest* trilogy.

[142] The Sorcerers of Rhand are first mentioned in *Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor* (Del Rey, 2008) and were noted by the author to be a knock on Ayn Rand followers. The first quote is from *Book of Sith: Secrets from the Dark Side* (Del Rey).

[143] Uthoqquan is a corruption of Ithaqua, from the August Derleth story of the same name (which was itself based on the Algernon Blackwood story, "The Wendigo"), and Clark Ashton Smith's "The Weird of Avoosl Wuthoqquan." Oozultharoum is the aborted name Uzuldaroum, from the same. Pnygatheem is from Knygathin Zhaum, from CAS' "The Testament of Athammaus." Xanthiir is as well, with no relation to Piers Anthony, *World of Warcraft*, or the cocklebur. Mezzallmech and Mhu'anThul were inspired by the wizard Zon Mezzalamech of Mhu Thulan in ancient Hyperborea, from the 1933 Clark Ashton Smith short story "Ubbo-Sathla," which is also referenced along with Lin Carter's "The Unbegotten Source" (from *Papyrus of the Dark Wisdom*) in the text. Mhu'anThul's equation with Zoth-Ommog is not incidental. Lotek'k, the "Terror from Beyond" is from the BioWare/LucasArts/EA MMORPG *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. Hershoon the Destroyer comes from *Creatures of the Galaxy* (West End Games). His original name Hērsum the Devout comes directly from Old English etymology of that word, from which the authors likely derived it.

Chapter 18: The Worms Eat Through Space and Time

[144] *Supernatural Encounters* was never meant to be an action story, but it is *Star Wars*, and they're always fun to write. The scene was meant to show that Otherspace is still a dangerous realm, populated by a host of monsters.

Chapter 19: A Droid's Tale

[145] Cuenyne-Q9: some readers expressed surprise while others knew it from early on. Q9 became a companion to Hex shortly after his retirement, so most of his colleagues wouldn't have known him. It seems likely that Mistress Mnemos came up with the "Master Mnemon" nickname to disguise Cuenyne's identity. Of course, given the ubiquity of droids in the galaxy and the fact that one droid is seen as the same as another, even rare models like the Q9 wouldn't necessarily have stood out.

[146] The idea that if Hextrophon wanted to fool them he'd had stayed away much longer borrows from Professor Digory's defense of Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

[147] Charon Thanas is from top-tier contributor Thomas Rathausky.

[148] The Azurite Society of Lords was first referenced in *The Dark Forces Saga, Part 2* (Wizards of the Coast). The Heinsnake Cult is from *Darth Vader and the Ninth Assassin #2* (Dark Horse). The Krath first appeared in *Tales of the Jedi: The Freedon Nadd Uprising* (Dark Horse).

[149] Justice Hethrir comes from *The Crystal Star*. His involvement with the Order of the Canted Circle (from the novel *Darth Plagueis*) and summoning of Waru under Palpatine's direction were fan-theories I liked that fit in the larger universe's dark conspiracies. Palpatine sending Thrawn into the Unknown Regions to build up a bulwark against vague threats to the Empire comes from *Vision of the Future* (Bantam Spectra) and *Command Decision* (*Star Wars Adventure Journal 11*, West End Games); what those terrors might be were first hinted at in *Cult Encounters*.

Book III: Firstborn of the Celestials & The Architects of Madness

[150] The song of Ciaran the Bard was paraphrased from "The Jewel of Bas," by Leigh Brackett.

[151] The saying from the Wol Cabasshite is taken from the lyrics of "Thy Kingdom Come," from the band Warlord (*The Holy Empire*, Sons of a Dream Music, 2013).

Chapter 20: Songs of the Eternal

[152] The music-based creation account here is akin to the Ainulindalë section of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* as well as to C.S. Lewis' *The Magician's Nephew*. It's called 'musical cosmogo-

ny' and it was here done with intent. This is not the first time Star Wars has referenced Tolkien. Lucas' third draft SW screenplay features dialogue for Ben Kenobi that is directly taken from Gandalf's line in *The Hobbit*. Scene 39 of the third draft reads: "What do you mean, 'good morning'? Do you mean that it is a good morning for you, or do you wish me a good morning, although it is obvious I'm not having one, or do you find that mornings in general are good?"

[153] Given that *The Phantom Menace* mentioned "angels" and a virgin birth, *The Empire Strikes Back* referenced "Hell," Darth Vader's chest plate contains Hebrew letters, and other Judeo-Christian concepts, I had no qualms using Hebrew nomenclature for the various spirit races found in the Tanakh, 1 Enoch, and ancient Near-Eastern cultures. It bears noting that Cherubim are not fat babies but powerful winged guardians with four faces, that of a lion, bull, eagle, and man. The Seraphim are six-winged throne guardians resembling flaming, serpentine beings. The Malakim are spirit messengers who often look like men but possess greater powers. The Ophanim are perhaps the most disturbing yet, sleepless throne guardians depicted as nested wheel-like entities with eyes all over.

[154] The original names for Earth are very similar to our modern one. In the language of the Ancient Near East and Levantine, there are *Erets* (Hebrew), *Erset* (Akkadian), *Ersetum* (Assyrian) and *Ara* (Aramaic); To this, we can add *Ard* (Arabic) and *Aarde* (Dutch), and is likely where Tolkien got Arda, which of course means Earth. The Old Saxxon *Ertha* comes from the Germanic *Eorthe*, and *Ert* in Middle Irish is akin to the Old Irish *Tir*, from which Latin gives us *Terr,* where we get Terra. As scholars don't understand how the distinct Indo-European and Semitic languages have this connection, many have dismissed it as coincidence. I suspect Hex might have something to say about that.

[155] First identified by Alan Moore in *Star Wars Marvel UK* story "The Pandora Effect," enter the Father of Shadows, aka. the Devil, Satan, Azazel, Lucifer, Belial, Mastema, the fallen angel, the Great Dragon, and in modern fiction, Melkor/Morgoth, Azathoth, Count Iblis, the Dark One, Tash, Lord Foul, Rakoth Maugrim, Nyarlathotep, Vaatu, and, of course, Bogan, which is the title/name Lucas gave. The Dark Lord trope tends to follow the Satan model even amongst "lesser" evils who are powerful, e.g., Sauron, the White Witch, Arawn, Nimir, John Cavil, the Crimson King, Randall Flag, and Palpatine. Since *Supernatural Encounters* is dealing with ultimate origins, it would have been a cheat to leave out that ultimate architect of evil, which I identified as the *Näkhäsh*, which is the word used in the Book of Genesis for the seraphic entity that appears in Eden.

[156] The myth of the Sun Dragon first comes from Matt Stover's *Revenge of the Sith* novelization (Del Rey). The same idea, only called a Starbird (Phoenix or Firebird) comes from Michael Kogge's *Rise of the Rebels*. Even earlier, George Lucas embodied the concept of elementals—specifically the Fire Elementals called Firedrakes—in his *Willow* trilogy, *Chronicles of the Shadow War*. Every sun has a Phoenix/Firebird/Sun Dragon inside it; and every planet has Elementals within it. 99.9% of the time, they just do their thing with no one the wiser, and this is true even when the planet is ruined, as they grow weak and begin to die. But sometimes they burst out and sometimes they leave their world for another. And if they're driven mad, they might lash out in ways that aren't understood by modern sapients.

[157] Aur Diamonds come from *The Essential Guide to Warfare: Author's Cut* — "The Celestials," (Star Wars Blog). The Foundation Stone comes from the LucasArts game *RTX Red Rock* .

[158] The four Quantum Machines come from the Lucasarts and JVC Musical Industries game, *Big Sky Trooper* (Super NES, 1995). Their basic job was to kickstart events that would then be taken over by other forces.

[159] These are more of less accurate translations. Yammsoro is a compound word.

[160] The Celestials: This cosmology postulates the existence of the *Star Wars* universe and other fictional universes as existing as actual realms outside of our universe, constructed by the angelic subcreators known as the Celestials, and connected by means of portals that the Celestials (and

occasionally others) can access. The Star Wars universe is created by four and three Celestials. The other names are homages to the original Star Wars creators. The etymology "earth-worker" is authentic and oddly serendipitous since that's what Lluxos does on a grand scale. Marutz was altered from the Etruscan Maris, a derivative of Mars, from which comes the names Marcius and Marcia. The interesting synchronicity here is that the name means war (as in *Star Wars*). Xurz was altered from Kurz, the Old High German word from which Kurtz derived. Synchronistically again, the word means "brief" and "incomplete." Wutzek comes from "The Pandora Effect." I postulated in "How Marvel UK Brought Complex Literary Themes to the Star Wars Universe" (*A Galaxy Far, Far Away: Exploring Star Wars Comics*; Sequart, 2016), that Wutzek's name may be a compound word based off the influential William Beckford Gothic novel *Vathek*: "Linguistically, 'woo' comes from an Old English word that refers to something that bends, twists, and turns. When Leia first sees Wutzek, she notes how he 'shifts and swirls.' Mavin says they caught and imprisoned him in an 'angle-trap.' Apart from the fact that it can also be read as an 'angel trap,' what's interesting is that the same root word for the Old Norse *vá* means both 'angle' and 'woe, calamity and danger.' No surprise, then, that *zek* is the Russian word for 'prisoner.'" What I didn't realize at the time was that "Wut" is a German word for "rage" and "anger," while "şek" is Crimean for "lock," and not dissimilar to the Russian word for one within a locked place. Thus, in Wutzek we have a raging and dangerous angel that twists and shifts while locked in an oddly angled prison. From Moore's perspective, Wutzek is the equivalent of Lovecraft's Yog-Sothoth. So, as father of the Architects, he's reinterpreted by Old One cultists as an Outer God and primordial cosmic entity, with all the aspects he's known for explored here.

Chapter 21: Progeny

[161] Firstborn races: Duinuogwuin Star Dragons first appeared in the *Adventure Journal #11*: "The Most Dangerous Foe" (West End Games). This is the first mention of the original Kwa name, "Kwoth." The Kwa first appeared in diminished form (the Kwi, aka. Blue Mountain People), in *The Courtship of Princess Leia*. The Kwa first appeared in *Star Wars #24*: "Infinity's End, Part 2" (Dark Horse). The Gree first appeared in the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #8*: "The Gree Enclave, (West End Games). The Sharu come from *Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu*. Wall pictorials inside the largest pyramid on Rafa V indicate a five-limbed, star-shaped progenitor, indicative of the form their Celestials had taken. The Silentium also come from *Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu,* by L. Neill Smith (Del Rey). While their holy circle is indicative of unity, oneness, and perfection, their holy numbers, 5, 7, and 11, are of additional interest and are reflected in their spiritual views. The five might be the Father of Lights and the four Osiarch that shaped Skyriver. The seven might be the Osiarch and the three Valdilar that became the Ones; the eleven can be one of several possibilities. I took Mu-Ab from L. Frank Baum. The Mu-Abin are split into two groups, the Ysandun and the Calomnad clan. The former is a Tuckerism of Lord Dunsany. The latter of George MacDonald. Baum, Dunsany, and MacDonald are the forefathers of the fantasy genre. Since the Mu-Ab created the earliest sapient droids in this galaxy, the Ki'tokt and the Silentium (and later the Kab-Ell), I made the former an anagram of Tik-Tok, one of the first sapient robots in literature, from the pages of *Ozma of Oz* (Reilly & Lee, 1907). Additionally, early fantasy writer James Branch Cabell was namechecked in the Kab-Ell. Other early SFF authors are Tuckerized elsewhere. Apart from its Lovecraftian roots, the Cthol (or Kathol) derive from *Endgame*, the fourth and last part of the *DarkStryder Campaign* series (West End Games). Since they're the powerful descendants of the Old Ones, named after Cthulhu, and yet not entirely evil but not entirely good either, this indicated to me a more involved story. Having the Cthol revealed to be the fallen Q'rel—identified as both the Krell of *Forbidden Planet* (MGM, 1956) and the Elder Things in *Cthulhu: the Xothic Wars* (GobboTown Games, 2017)—was a nice bit of serendipity. The Alashan come from the three-part Chris Claremont story "World of Fire," "The Word for World is Death," and "The Guardian of Forever," which appeared in the pages of Marvel UK's *Star Wars Weekly* #107-115, reprinted

in Canada and the U.S., as *Star Wars 2: World of Fire* (Marvel Illustrated Books). The Ahra Naffi come from *The Black Fleet Crisis: Book 1: Before the Storm* (Bantam-Spectra). They're one of those unknown ancient precursor races who fit the creation narrative well. The Ahra Naffi begat the Qella, who in turn became the Qonet, a peaceful species who grew their technology from organic materials (much like the Yuuzhan Vong had done). The Kalai derive from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #5* article, "Zirtran's Anchor." One of the fun things about the research for this story was rediscovering these fascinating bits of lore and figuring out how they fit together in the larger tapestry of ancient history. The Killiks were first mentioned in *The Illustrated Star Wars Universe* (Bantam-Spectra) and referenced in several stories after that, but they didn't make their first actual appearance until *Dark Nest I: The Joiner King* (Del Rey). The ancient flying lizard race, the Tempestro, come from "The Prize: A Scout Adventure," in *Galaxy Guide 8: Scouts* (West End Games). The Ent-like Neti (or the Ryyk) from Myrkr, come from *Tales of the Jedi* #5: "The Saga of Nomi Sunrider, Part 3." I still find it amusing and appropriate that they were named after Tolkien's race, which is likely why they were later connected to Myrkr, which sounds like Mirkwood. The Sumerian god Neti was the chief gatekeeper of the Netherworld, which is why I linked the Neti to the Kindalo (apart from the visual cues that suggested a connection). The Lucent, known as the Crystal Spiders, come from the article "Crystal Web Space Station," by Bill Slavicsek and Michele Carter, in *Polyhedron #93* and *#94*. The idea of a race of spiders who are not evil or destructive but curious, honorable, and Force-sensitive was appealing, especially since fiction tends to ignore the real-life usefulness of spiders and play instead on squeamishness. Their original, unpronounceable name was never listed, and the "Lucent" name was christened by Baron Admistrator Daran Tal. Their original name A'qavish-qerach is basically Hebrew for crystal spider. The Aing-Tii come from *The Kathol Outback* (West End Games); Timothy Zahn later used them in *Vision of the Future* (Bantam-Spectra). The Aing-Tii deities, "Those Who Dwell Beyond the Veil," who taught them the Force in eons past is, thus, a reference to the Celestials. The Sunesi come from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #10* story, "Only Droids Serve the Maker" (West End Games). A monotheistic race, their famous expression "Sifu Mungu," translates in Swahili to "Praise God." The Sephi first appeared in *Jedi: Yoda* (Dark Horse), and it was later retconned by Lucasfilm that all pointy-eared (Elvish) races are either Sephi or related to them, which provided a suitable retcon for the various ones seen over the years in Star Wars lore. *Willow* and its sequels, co-written by George Lucas, embrace the notion of High Elves, so directly correlating the Sephi with the Elves was a logical conclusion as was the idea that they'd once had great dominions. The manta-like Oswaft are from *Lando Calrissian and the Starcave of ThonBoka* (Del Rey). There are numerous catlike races in the Star Wars Expanded Universe and, as this story proposes, many (but not necessarily all) spread out from the lionlike Cathar, who first appeared in the first issue of *Tales of the Jedi: Dark Lords of the Sith* (Dark Horse). The Sholam are an unknown and unnamed vanished race first mentioned in *Empire at War* (LucasArts, 2006). Although their activity in Skyriver is expanded, what became of them is not indicated. For what it's worth, their sun's name, Magatesso, refers to an enchanter's plot (or weave, as in a spell). The Pelgrin come from *The Power of the Jedi Sourcebook* (Wizards of the Coast). Their Oracle, which provided visions to Force-sensitives, is a fascinating ancient construct. The Pa Tho are another vanished and unknown race, first mentioned in *Tyrant's Test*, the third novel in *The Black Fleet Crisis* trilogy (Bantam-Spectra, 1996). Their name means the "Compassionate Ones." The Asmerukii are yet another vanished and unknown race who left behind ruins on their world (of the same name). In this case, I developed them as a canid race due to the fact that in one language, *meru* means dog, while in Javanese, it refers to a sacred five-peaked mountain (hence their annual trek to their sacred mountain). They come from *Cloak of Deception* (Del Rey). The Kharubdians or Kharubdis are another vanished race who left behind ruins on their world. Jerrilek comes from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #4:* "Loyalties" (West End Games). Here, they got some development. The ruins were likely built by one of their

offspring races that they lived with, probably the Feeorin. The Xaxax are a vanished species first mentioned in *The Unknown Regions* (Wizards of the Coast). Similar to many of the Firstborn, they were a technologically-advanced race who left behind arcane, powerful devices. The etymology of *sax* (from whence derive Saxons) indicates stone cutters or stone cutting. In other words, the creation of gems. This root also has ties to the word "six." The Eellayin of Polis Massa are another vanished and unknown race who left behind ruins. They derive from *Revenge of the Sith: The Visual Dictionary*. Etymologically, "eell-ayin" means "those before the fountain (or spring)" or "those before the eye." A simpler derivation might be made from the Finnish *eliön*, which simply means organism. It may be that the authors were being cute and came up with a homophone for "alien." However, Bene Elyon, which sounds close to Eellayin, means "Sons of the Most High," a reference to angelic entities. Polis Massa is, of course, Massapolis reversed, the City of the Multitudes. As to the design of the Eellayin, given that the Kallidahin (aka Polis Massans) of Kallidah might be a borrowing from the Kalidah of L. Frank Baum's Oz stories, a hybrid race of tiger-headed bears, and that the Kallidahin are the offspring race of the Eellayin, I kept to the mythical hybrid aspect with the obvious derivation from eel-lion, the classic Chimera (minus the goat part) with the head of a lion and tail of serpent, imagery that can be traced as far back as the walls of Carchemish from the late Hittite period. The Osserians were an unknown and presumably extinct race from Osseria, the unnamed planet from the Marvel *Pizzazz* series. They were named and developed here. The Krevaaki were first revealed as holocron gatekeeper, Jedi Master Bodo Baas, in *Dark Empire #5*: "Emperor Reborn" (Dark Horse). The El'gusclar-fal'Mörtilspí are the Cocytans of Alan Dean Foster's *The Dig* (LucasArts), an advanced race of griffin-like aliens whose original species name or homeworld was never given. Said to be an unpronounceable name, the one provided here is a combination of last names from some of that game's creators, Steven Spielberg, Noah Falstein, Bill Tiller, Brian Moriarty, Dave Grossman, and Sean Clark. The Caamasi were first mentioned in *Specter of the Past*, the first book in *The Hand of Thrawn* duology (Bantam-Spectra). The Siniteen are one of two races of the Firstborn that can be seen in the original trilogy, specifically the cantina scene in *A New Hope*.

The Asogians come from *Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace* and *ET: The Extraterrestrial.* The Hysalrians come from *Star Wars Galaxy Magazine #9* (Topps), and were created by Chuck Hamilton for the "Design an Alien" competition that the magazine ran. The aquatic, serpentine Dur Sabon come from *Star Wars Tales #3* story, "Deal with a Demon" (Dark Horse). The telekinetic Celegians, which resemble floating brains, come from *Tales of the Jedi: The Golden Age of the Sith #0*: "Conquest and Unification" (Dark Horse). The Arrak or Arrakan or Leviathans (as they were later dubbed), are from "Flight of the Jedi" (*Valkyrie #20,* 2000). They're the creators of the Duor, who themselves created the Battrach. The Javan are the first inhabitants of the Yavin system. Their name is original to this story. Keeping it simple, I named them Javan from Noah's grandson in Genesis (*Yavan* in Hebrew), who became the father of the ancient Greek people. The Arbrans never appeared in story until now, but their homeworld of Arbra and the Hoojibs they left behind first appeared in *Star Wars #55:* "Plif!" (Marvel), adapted in the record/storybook *Planet of the Hoojibs* (Buena Vista). I presume they look something like the Darker. Sicmoo is the original name for the Bith from *A New Hope*, and are included here due to the fact that the Gree regard them as one of the Elder Races, as noted in "The Gree Enclave," from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #8.* Xaczhick comes from Lucas' 1974 rough draft screenplay for *The Star Wars*. It was later said to be the secret language of the Wookiees in *The Han Solo Trilogy: Volume 3: Rebel Dawn* (Bantam-Spectra). I resurrected it here for the name of the giant-sized Wookiee-like creature who embraces Chewbacca in *Star Wars #50:* "The Crimson Forever" (Marvel, 1981). Grudakk, who helps the Ewoks in *The Adventures of Teebo: A Tale of Magic and Suspense* (Random House, 1984), is also a member. Tchuukthai or Wharls were first mentioned in *The Courtship of Princess Leia*, but were later retconned by Daniel Wallace in *The Essential Guide to Planets and Moons* to be Master Thon's unnamed race from *Tales of the Jedi*

and the Wharls from *Tales of the Jedi Companion*. Demmeonites come from Jan Strnad's short-lived comic-book series, *Dalgoda*, which was a great space-opera series published by Fantagraphics (1984-1986). The Canidans are also included in this story. UrSkeks come from *The Dark Crystal* (Universal), produced by Jim Henson and Gary Kurtz, and directed by Jim Henson and Frank Oz. Besides the fact that these Star Wars alumni (and numerous Star Wars crew) worked on that film, many fans already long speculated it to be part of the ancient *Star Wars* universe. It was time to make that connection explicit. Muun were first named when *Star Wars Gamer #10* article, "Galactic Power Brokers" identified San Hill, the head of the Banking Clan from *Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, as such. However, Hill's connection to Muunilinst, from *Specter of the Past,* came from the March 2002, HoloNet News website. The fascinating Zeffonians come from *Star Wars: Jedi: Fallen Order* (EA/Respawn Entertainment). The Eruthros name is new here. Many became the Sith. Keeping it simple again, ερυθρός simply means red in Ancient Greek, but the Middle English *thro* (or *thra*) amalgamated with Quenya leads to "the Earnest (or "Eager") of Eru" or the "the Bold of Eru," Eru meaning "the One." Interestingly, *thro* can also mean "the stubborn" and "obstinate." Talortai are from *Star Wars: Empire at War: Forces of Corruption* (Petroglyph/LucasArts). Both mysterious and Force-sensitive, able to distinguish between light and dark, they're reluctant to discuss their abilities. The Urey'la are from the fantasy book, *The Well of the Worlds*, by Robert Mullin, creator of the Star Wars Expanded Universe Chronology. Sumrians come from *The Imperial Sourcebook* (West End Games). Not much was said about them there, but in an interview the author gave additional information about them as one of the most ancient races in the galaxy: http://deckplans.00sf.com/Research/Q_and_A.html. Their reclaiming of dead races (to serve as vessels for them) comes directly from there. The K'kybak come from *Honor Among Thieves* (Del Rey). Little is said about them save that they invented the Hyperspace Nullifier superweapon and fell victim to their own hubris. The Pan-preneur come from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #8* article, "The Yard of Opportunity" (West End Games), from which there's scant information on them apart from their genetic connection to the Mon Calamari. Based on several factors, I had them serve as the never-named Great Race of H.P. Lovecraft's legendarium, who hail from Pnakotus. The oceanic planet Savareen, from *Galaxy Guide 9: Fragments from the Rim* (West End Games), is home to the Pnakotic Coast. Pan-Preneur literally means "Brain Takers," or "Part-takers." The suffix is not generally used in a pejorative sense, but rather in the sense of meaning to "gain" something. Entrepreneurs, for example, undertake an endeavor. The Great Race exchange minds with other races such as the Yith. Yitheeth is another oceanic planet in the EU (*Jedi Council: Acts of War*; Dark Horse), and home to the immigrant Yinchorri, allowing me to make the original inhabitants the cone-like Yithians, an offspring race of the Pan-Preneur. The Dranconians and Pulrista are ancient races from the original *Lost in Space* (20th Century Fox, 1966-68), a space opera series that influenced Lucas, as it did me. Not only was it scored by John Williams, but C-3P0's banter with R2-D2 can be traced to Jonathan Harris' Dr. Smith's alliterative insults to the Robinson Robot, which itself was borrowed from Edmond Hamilton's Grag and Otho from the popular *Captain Future* series. Though Pulrista is a new name (the race were never given a proper name besides "Bubble Creatures"), connecting them to the Pulra (which I made their offspring race) gave me a species name. Making them the parent race of the Inleshat (a rather unseemly name which got me to thinking upon a more dignified origin) gave me the homeworld of Leshan for that race (before they fled to Drexel II) and Lish as the ideal homeworld for their Pulrista parent race. The Tor-Ohnahmi come from *Game Master International* #7 (1991). Having eighty Precursor races harmonized with the Sumrians' esoteric identification of their eight numeric and caste system; it also allows other races who fit the criteria to be part of the Firstborn—allowing fans, future writers, artists, and RPG gamemasters to have creative freedom. The criteria in question generally involves an ancient race (extant or not) who have or once had inherent abilities and powers beyond that of the average being. Not entirely explicit in the narrative is who of the many

offspring races each of the Firstborn created. There are several listed in the story, but most remain untold as this would prove an onerous task. Some might seem obvious based on superficial appearances, however, even in this, caution must be employed. One Precursor race, seeing the catlike offspring of another, might have determined to create their own catlike race.

[162] Anthropomorphic animals: in Star Wars, there are a lot of cute races, so the idea here was simply to say it's because the Firstborn appreciate variety in all its forms, and that includes beings who would be considered by them (and us) cute.

[163] My conception of the In-Between World ensures there is no the Butterfly Effect.

[164] The prophecy of the Son of the Suns first appeared in an early draft script of what became the original *Star Wars* film. It read "…And in the time of greatest despair, there shall come a savior, and he shall be known as THE SON OF THE SUNS." —Journal of the Whills, 3:127. For years, fans speculated on this and its relation to the Chosen One and whether it applied to Anakin or Luke. It didn't appear again until the first season episode of *The Clone Wars*, "Trespass" (Cartoon Network, 2009), where the title was anticlimatically applied to the Talz Chieftain, Thi-Sen. In *Galaxy of War*, it was a prophecy for the Sun Guard of Thrysus, secretly encouraged by the Sith, who had infiltrated the Sun Guard and projected the prophetic figure unto themselves. Here, however, the prophecy is given greater weight as revealed to be related to the Chosen Ones and the great Restoration. The application or misapplication of prophecy to different concepts is accurate to how cultures appropriate religious ideas and myths for their own purposes. The latter section comes directly from what Logray recites after Morag's defeat in the *Ewoks* episode, "Sunstar vs. Shadowstone."

Chapter 22: Their Cold Sovereignty

[165] Of Tilotny: Alan Moore's stories are amongst my favorites. I initially pitched an introduction to their collection in *Star Wars Omnibus: Wild Space, Volume 1*. When that failed to materialize, I got to write about them in this story as well as in the article "How Marvel UK Brought Complex Literary Themes to the Star Wars Universe" (*A Galaxy Far, Far Away: Exploring Star Wars Comics*; Sequart, 2016).

[166] "Volatile speech" and "Cold Sovereignty" are a play on words as Tilotny could be translated as meaning "volatile speech" (through the Crimean *til* and Polish *lotny*) and Cold Danda Sine as "their cold sovereignty" (through the Sanskrit *danda* and Danish *sine*). In "Tilotny Throws a Shape," some of Moore's entities are intentionally ironic. Tilotny represents traditional art. Horliss-Horliss represents the avante-garde, specifically surrealism. Splendid Ap is Cubism. Cold Danda Sine is Dadaism. In the real world, avante-garde styles struggled to be recognized as legitimate art-forms against the staunch proponents of traditional art, who didn't like or understand it. Surrealism was concerned with liberating people from the falsehoods and illusions imposed upon it by so-called rational society by presenting a "super-reality," created by resolving the contradiction of reality with the mysticism and metaphysics of dreams and imagination—the conscious and subconscious worlds united. Thus, Horliss-Horliss is the most reflective, emotional and morally-directed of the four. Moore has Horliss-Horliss use the words "think," "perceive," or "feel" six times. Note that how after getting Splendid Ap to fix the "disorder" of the dead tiny movers, he quickly becomes "tired of shape and substance." This is a reaction to the strife and violence that have entered in amongst them (and metaphorically to the violence and strife of the world). This attribute is also his flaw because he's not yet wise enough to perceive that they need to stay together. Tilotny's imposed authoritarianism causes him to withdraw from the domination of reality (traditional art), as well as the revolutionary ardor of chaos (Dada) and modernist abstraction of time-space (Cubism). Thus, he abandons his siblings for a dreamland of his own imagining in which there is no strife. Given his nature and their natures, how deeply he feels and thinks, and how immature they all are, it's understandable why he does this. Nevertheless, the tragedy of this is that the Architects' downward spiral is exacerbated by his actions.

[167] Of Cold Danda Sine: The fun one of the group, Cold Danda Sine's speech pattern is all about excitement and motion and anti-concepts. At least at this stage it is. Etymologically, there's a lot going on here, with "Cold" having the opposite meaning in its Old English form of "cald," referring to "fire, passion, and excitement," and "Sine" referring to the bosom (or "heart" of something). In Moore's tales, Danda very likely represents Dada, an "anti-art" art form that was often satirical or nonsensical, but purposely so, centered as it was on protest against the stupidity and horrors of World War I. In other words, Cold Danda Sine is the heart of impassioned Dadaism. Dada countered the conventional views of "reason" and "logic" that had led them into war with chaos, irrationality, unconventionality, and absurdity. Cold Danda Sine is, thus, an overreaction to violence, both the violence he almost suffered at the hands of his parent, and the violence he sees in the universe. His early criticism of Tilotny is reflective of the criticism that Dada lobbied against traditional art, which represented high culture, just as his admiration for Horliss-Horliss is reflective of the admiration practitioners of Dada had for the rebelliousness of abstract art. Sine's obsession with new forms over old ones is a natural reaction to the desire to overthrow that which is evil. This is the underlying reason Sine can't withdraw with Horliss-Horliss into the solitude of a dream-world. Dada's very *raison d'etre* is to tear down the powers-that-be. The departure of Horliss-Horliss sets off Sine's negative qualities. Without Horliss-Horliss as the bridge between reality and dream, between order and chaos, Sine's attributes becomes fatal flaws. His burning zeal against the bourgeois—namely, a galactic civilization that's given into lies and violence—becomes a disdain for nearly everything, save his burning zeal for bringing about new things. The great irony is that the protester against violence becomes violent, and his "anti-art" becomes a nightmarish anti-life. Of course, even that fades and becomes *old* and *sinful* (the latter two of which are alternate definitions of "sine"). This is all subtext in Moore's tale, but it made great fodder for exploration here.

[168] Of Splendid Ap: Another fascinating character to write in that he's very "left-brained" and logical. I like his siblings' reactions to him. And seeing him grow over time was interesting. I have to credit my proofreaders Greg Mitchell and Luke Van Horn for suggesting that the solution to the existence of Disney's Star Wars universe lay in the actions of Splendid Ap, who could create a second universe. I resisted, at first, as I frankly found the reboot to be in poor taste and the decanonization of the Expanded Universe a grossly disrespectful act to the fans and contributors of that 40 year saga. Nevertheless, for the sake of fans and those open to a dual-canon saga, I came up with a solution that could work. Of course, Splendid Ap's second-universe is not explicitly the Disney universe and can be interpreted as something else altogether. Yet, for those of you wanting a way for both to co-exist, this is one. Some criticized the lines in the first published online draft as being insulting, but if you re-read what's written, it says: "*Without* the investment of the Celestials working on it," and that is exactly what the Celestials went on to do, however, as that was part of the larger Crystal Riders material that was still in development, that wasn't revealed until now.

[169] As mentioned above, Splendid Ap represents abstract Cubism and his name is short for several related appellations. To convey this, Moore renders his speech so abstractly that it's not even translated. Ap's gift is his ability to move through time and space, which, of course, is reflected in Cubism. Cubism was a response to the modern world and the changing experience of time, space, and movement, particularly as compared to former times. Cubism, thus, abandoned traditional perspective techniques—the hallmark of art since ancient times—for the sake of placing different angles and viewpoints together for what was believed to present a *truer* perspective. All four of Moore's characters in this story are amusing, but Splendid Ap is perhaps the most (in part due to John Stokes' hilarious portrayal of him). He's also the most paradoxically perplexing. He starts off almost as a mathematical abstraction which even his siblings struggle to understand. Cold Danda Sine thinks that Ap doesn't comprehend how time works, and even the narrator suggests that time confuses him. In spite of that, he tries and successfully restores Leia and the stormtroop-

ers to life, removing them as a threat to her by placing them in a different time period. *Supernatural Encounters* has him do it on purpose, but arguably it might have been an accident, which is, of course, funnier—but I've always seen Splendid Ap as smarter than his siblings gave him credit for, and that's funny in a different way. In the real world, few art fans actually understood what Cubism was portraying at the time, something only the artist really understood, if at all. Unlike Surrealism and Dadaism, Cubism didn't have a moral drive, but rather a concern with reflecting modern reality in its quickly fleeting moments as it continually developed and morphed. So too Splendid Ap isn't concerned with Horliss-Horliss' ethical dilemma and need to escape, nor with the horrors of war that Sine reacts to, but with knowledge alone. With it, he believes he can best navigate this new realm in which he finds himself. The irony of all this is that Ap *least* understands the most important quotient in life. In a drive to comprehend the physical properties of the world, he ignores the deeper properties—such as the importance of life and love. In that respect alone, he's actually the least "splendid" amongst them (in that splendid refers to something that shines bright or is brilliant). He starts off as the embodiment of the scientist whose only concern is figuring out the equation and not the fact that it's being used for the construction of a weapon that will destroy lives. This initially makes Ap a dangerous if unwitting participant with Tilotny and Cold Danda Sine. As to R2 and C-3PO's meeting with him, I needed a way for them to play the role they do in other events. *Indiana Jones* has the droids appear in hieroglyphs. Other tales have them in other strange times and places. Then there's the mention in *The Making of Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith* by George Lucas, who says that R2-D2 recounted the story of Star Wars to a Shaman of the Whills one hundred years after the Battle of Endor. So having Ap meet them in a "cut scene" after he resurrects Leia was a way to give R2 the power to do the things that later come to be.

Chapter 23: Shapes of Things to Come

[170] Taken from H. G. Wells, the title is a play on "Tilotny Throws a Shape," which this section deals directly with. Moore's story presents Tilotny and her siblings as both godlike in their powers and yet oddly childlike and childish. That coupled with the idea that Tilotny was clearly wrong about several of her assumptions (e.g., having created Leia), indicated to me that they were themselves newly created and, despite their later evil actions, started off innocent enough, reacting to the world around them and trying to survive in the ways they each deemed best. In the literature of fairies and spirits, newly created spirit-beings are not infants but full-grown and knowledgeable, if somewhat naïve. These four are a good example and variation on that theme, and illustrator John Stokes clearly saw that as his depiction of Tilotny is that of the classic Fairy Queen. Their powers give them both an odd freedom and *alienness* that Humans—so often frustrated by their lack of power—don't generally have. So the challenge was to maintain their individual otherness, which Moore established so well, while taking their characteristic flaws to their logical conclusions to develop them into the beings they'll ultimately become by story's end. This section takes a single event and presents their different reactions to it, allowing the reader a deeper glimpse into their individual psyches.

[171] Illathurion is directly borrowed from Lord Dunsany's Allathurion, in the short story, "The Fortress Unvanquishable, Save for Sacnoth" (*The Sword of Welleran and Other Stories;* Ballantyne Press, 1908). In Allathurion, the Elves and Dryads walked with beast and man until such time came as the latter's dreams were haunted by visions of Hell. The actual etymology of "Illr" and "Thuris" (from Old Norse and Old Saxon), plus the English "-ian," is "belonging to an evil demon/monster/giant." "Hidden Universe" is an in-universe etymology, also intended as a reference to the Dunsany story, as well as the 1958 Kurosawa film *The Hidden Fortress*.

[172] Corrupted Archetypes first appeared in "The Seven Geases," by Clark Ashton Smith; *Weird Tales*, October, 1934; collected in *The Door to Saturn: The Collected Fantasies of Clark Ashton Smith, Vol 2* (Night Shade Books, 2015)

Chapter 24: The First Earthworlds

[173] In the article, "Spaceman's Burden," Den Valdron writes, "I suppose it's a foolish exercise in gamesmanship trying to connect one writer's world to another. It's the sort of thing that makes eyes red and palms hairy, no good comes of it. But, it's a game, and its fun. So, let's play." (https://www.erbzine.com/mag17/1735.html) The Grand Unification Theory (or GUT), as I've come to call it, is a way of making sense of all the crossovers that have appeared in Star Wars fiction over the years. Ironically, I feel a general ambivalence towards crossovers. While they're conceptually interesting, more often than not I've found myself repelled by the crassly commercial reasons behind them, the execution of which oftentimes disregards lore and narrative integrity. In the case of the EU, most of the crossovers that have appeared over the years haven't been for commercial reasons, but were done by authors who are fans of these stories and felt they made for fun easter eggs.

Despite the reasons behind them, the appearance of a xenomorph or *Firefly*-class ship still requires explanation. I sought to provide that in tandem with the construction of a contextual setting in time and place for Humans (and some aliens) in Skyriver. This required a working historical and chronological framework which pre-established stories helped shape. More importantly than even providing a setting, the crossovers often helped to underscore the themes present in SE.

That said, the presence of crossovers should not be seen as a dogmatic declaration that these universes exist in the Star Wars galaxy. As with anything associated with new or controversial ideas, how far one is willing to go and what one finds palatable is ultimately dependent on the individual reader. For this reason, I came up with a multi-pronged methodology for interpreting crossovers; four different approaches for understanding and interpreting crossovers that allow fans to make their own determination as to what works best for them:

1. *Coincidental*: The events bear *similarities*, but are not the same.
2. *Relational*: The events represent *a version* of that universe, but are not exactly as depicted in the original source, which might represent in-universe works such as holodramas.
3. *Congruity*: The events represent the *very same events* as depicted in the original source. This doesn't mean that the characters or narrator are correct about everything they conclude.
4. *Some-or-All of the Above*: You determine what works best in each given scenario. This allows you to take each on a case-by-case basis.

While all of it can be interpreted through a meta-narrative lens, akin to what's hinted at in Matt Stover's *Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor*, I find that that only works when it's also accompanied by at least one of the above scenarios; otherwise, meta-narratives start to unravel into a kind of scholar-porn. The Grand Unification Theory is meant to provide *potentialities* for fans to have fun with, whether in their own imaginations, RPG adventures, stories, artwork, etc. The Skyriver galaxy is mammoth and its history is long and old; and as much as is revealed in SE, there's room to spare for much more.

[174] The Lucasverse consists of nearly all of the works of George Lucas, such as *THX-1138* (which Robert Sawyer's *Alien Exodus* trilogy first incorporated), *E.T.,* which Lucas himself crossed over (establishing a canonical precedent for crossovers), and works published by Lucasfilm, not just the expanded universe, but series such as Deborah Chester's *Lucasfilm's Alien Chronicles* and Garth Nix's *Seventh Tower* series (HarperCollins, 2017) and all of LucasArts games. With those parameters, we can then look at any crossover that's appeared in a *Star Wars* story, such as *Firefly-Serenity* from *Evasive Action: Prey* and *Alien/Predator* from *X-Wing Rogue Squadron: The Phantom Affair* and *Coruscant Nights II: Street of Shadows*. We can also take into account anything which references *Star Wars* people, places, or things in-universe, and even other works from EU authors, such as the Kevin J. Anderson-Rebecca Moesta *Titan AE* novel, which includes

Rybets. The GUT goes even further to include several of Lucas' influences as well as later stories that were influenced by *Star Wars*. Though by no means a comprehensive list, based on all the above, this includes the classic space opera stories of Leigh Brackett and Edmond. And while they didn't draft any of the original *Star Wars* screenplays, as suggested by the Youtube video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhR2qD7D8QY, per Craig Miller—who was there at the time Lucas first met Brackett—"that doesn't mean Lucas didn't take ideas from them" (and the evidence in that video and other sources makes clear that he did). Others include C.L. Moore, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Clark Ashton Smith, H.P. Lovecraft, Robert W. Chambers, Brian Daley's "Hobart Floyt and Alacrity Fitzhugh" trilogy (*Requiem for a Ruler of Worlds, Jinx on a Terran Inheritance,* and *Fall of the White Ship Avatar)*, *Buck Rogers*, *Flash Gordon*, *The Dark Crystal, Labyrinth, Metropolis, Forbidden Planet, The Brain from the Planet Arous, Blade Runner*, its Dick predecessor, and side-quel *Soldier* (see below), *Logan's Run, Close Encounters of the Third Kind, The Last Starfighter, Babylon 5, V, SG-1/SG-Atlantis, Space 1999* and other works of Gerry Anderson, which made their first appearance in the EU in the original Hans Jenssen illustration of *Inside the Worlds of Star Wars: Attack of the Clones*, with uniformed members of the International Rescue from *The Thunderbirds; Star Trek, Lost in Space, Battlestar Galactica*, *Farscape*, *Dark Matter,* the space opera films of Roger Corman, *Ice Pirates, The Fifth Element, Star Control*, *Lifeforce* (and its Wilson predecessor), Jon Strnad's *Dalgoda*, *Event Horizon, Pandorum, Monsters, District 9, Hardware, The Matrix, Elder Scrolls*, *Metroid, Mutant Chronicles, Treasure Planet, Starchaser: the Legend of Orin, Galaxy Rangers, Blackstar, Avatar/The Legend of Korra, Final Space,* Jason Fry's *Jupiter Pirates*, *Bucky O'Hare*, *Jazz Jackrabbit*, *Star Fox*, *Zork, Strange Adventures in Infinite Space*, and more…

Some are mere nods, some are more involved. A few are explicit, many are not. Most are connected in some way, shape, or form to Star Wars, e.g., *The Galaxy Rangers* is a space-opera animated series co-written with Brian Daley, James Luceno, and Shelly Shapiro. Given that some of these stories link to others, the tapestry may even be wider. For example, a *Firefly*-class transport was shown flying over Coruscant in the webstrip series *Evasive Action: Prey* (Hyperspace, 2006) and earlier over Caprica in the 2003 *Battlestar Galactica* miniseries. And in the Paul W. S. Anderson film *Soldier* (Warner Bros, 1998), we find a nexus of crossovers: the weapon training history of Sgt. Todd 3465 (Kurt Russell) indicates he was trained on the M41A Pulse Rifle and USCM Smartgun, weapons from *Aliens*; on the planet Arcadia 234 is not only a spinner from *Blade Runner* but a piece of the *Lewis & Clark* from *Event Horizon* (1997). His service record includes receipts of the "Plissken Medal," a reference to *Escape from New York*, the "O'Neil Ring Award," a reference to *Stargate*, the "Maccready Cross," a reference to *The Thing*, and citations for the Nibian Moons Campaign, the Antares Maelstrom War, and the War of Perdition's Flames, locations referred to in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*. References to the Shoulder of Orion and Tannhäuser Gate are, of course, from *Blade Runner*. Of the few cases where *Star Wars* is referenced as a film, as it is in *E.T.,* either the Earth presented in those scenarios is our Earth or Option 2 (above) is the case…

The Grand Unification Theory can be said to be similar in some respects to the Wold Newton Universe, a literary crossover universe begun by author Philip Jose Farmer and expanded on by writer, Win Scott Eckert, and others (http://www.winscotteckert.com), or the Tommy Westphall Universe Hypothesis, though it's by no means intended to be the same as either.

[175] From the alternate universe version of Andowyne in the Lucas-Claremont *Chronicles of the Shadow War* trilogy came concepts such as the Echo Universe and Infinity Worlds (named after the Infinities label LFL gave to noncanonical works) to house concepts that don't fit well in the canonically-established expanded universe, but still exist as stories.

[176] The etymology of Bogan, which is the word Lucas used in his original manuscripts for *The Star Wars* for the avatar of the Dark Side, is interesting. *Bogey*, is, of course, a hostile, supernatural entity that, when capitalized, referred to the Devil. In its common form, bogeys and bogles

were ghosts and goblins, from which the word Boogieman (or Bogey Man) derives. The Buggane (or Boagane) in Manx mythology was a shapeshifting ogre with flaming eyes. The Norwegian *Bugge* is a predatory giant, while in Middle-English, it referred to a specter. In its earliest forms, *boga* and *bogi* referred to the archer and hunting (the word "bow" derives from it) as well as goat-shaped demons (the word *buck* in Old English, *bucca* and *boc* initially referred to he-goats and various demonic entities, as does the Cornish *puca* for demon and goblin), which are closely connected aspects in the Levant and Ancient Near East, particular in its allusion to Azazel, the scapegoat of Leviticus and one of the original leaders of the evil Watchers from the Book of Enoch (a group re-interpreted in a benevolent light in Sumerian, Assyrian, and Babylonian mythology as the Anunnaki). Perhaps not coincidentally, *Bolgen* is one of the early titles given to Melkor/Morgoth in Tolkien's legendarium (*The History of Middle-earth IV: The Shaping of Middle-Earth*, George Allen & Unwin), a title that in Old English means "filled with rage." For more on this, see my essay in the anthology, *Musings on Monsters: Observations on the World of Classic Horror* (Sequart Press, 2021).

[177] Frivoli comes from the animated film, *Twice Upon a Time* (Warner Bros, 1983), produced by George Lucas. An ancient Greek word for balance, equilibrium, and stability, Isorropía is the name given to the world of the Midichlorians. Angorathea comes from Kenneth Flint's *The Heart of the Jedi* (a lost EU novel made available by the author on www.starwarstimeline.net.)

[178] After Lucas sold *Star Wars* to Disney, I felt more comfortable utilizing the names I'd given to Father, Son, and Daughter (from the Mortis arc of *The Clone Wars* series). Elegast is a name that I took from the 12th Century Middle-Dutch poem *Karel ende Elegast*. The name essentially means "Elf Spirit," and scholars have cited him as the same King of the Elves (or Fairies) as Alberich and Oberon, which I thought a fitting name for Father. Eipha and Niphal are considerably more obscure. *Ephah* refers to "darkness," whereas *epheh* (אֶפְעֶה) is a viper or snake, but the Egyptian loanword *ephah* (עֵיפָה) also referred to a measure. So as a name, it could have originally referred to Son as measured. The Hebrew verbal root *naphal* (נ־פ־ל) means to "fall," whereas the Aramaic noun *naphila* means "giant" (and both have been proposed for the origin of the word נפילים "Nephilim"), however, *nephal* also has the sense of falling down in worship (נָפַל). So, as a name it could have originally refered to Daughter as one who was loyal and obeisant. In other words, the double-meanings allow for an initial expression of their character before and after they'd grown imbalanced. Son and Daughter demonstrate the reason the Celestials have to withdraw from the galaxy after its turn to darkness. They may be spirit beings, but they're susceptible to fall just like any sapient being with free will.

[179] The Shamaness of the Whills is the Force Priestess from the sixth season episodes of *The Clone Wars,* "Voices" "Destiny," and "Sacrifice." Although depicted as five entities, Dave Filoni clarified that it's only one (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdcWbbG8omw). Given the deleted scene from *Revenge of the Sith,* in which Qui-Gon Jinn tells Yoda he learned the secret of immortality from a "Shaman" of the Whills (in another cut scene, Yoda says this secret came from the "Ancient Order of the Whills"), and the fact that Qui-Gon's disembodied voice leads Yoda to the Force Priestesses, it seems clear that the Force Priestess *is* the Shaman of the Whills. Filoni defined the Priestess as "one ancient being separated over a time that for our perception to be able to see her, she is these many different iconic things presented to us." As the Celestials wouldn't just use her title, she had to have a name, and for that there was only choice.

[180] This speech was influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), a German theologian and pastor, who actively worked against Hitler and the Nazis before and during World War II, a stance that resulted in his imprisonment and death. In contemplating how a nation of intelligent beings could so easily be seduced by a malevolent leader and his part, this is what he said: "The impression one gains is not so much that stupidity is a congenital defect, but that, under certain circumstances, people are made stupid or that they allow this to happen to them. Upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of

a political or of a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity. It would even seem that this is virtually a sociological-psychological law. The power of the one needs the stupidity of the other. The process at work here is not that human capacities, for instance, the intellect, suddenly atrophy or fail. Instead, it seems that under the overwhelming impact of rising power, humans are deprived of their inner independence, and, consciously, give up establishing an autonomous position toward the emerging circumstances."

[181] The Sharu's Behemoths/Dinosaurs are called Pherox, which is an ancient Aeolian word for beasts, derived from *ther* (from which we get *therion*), a declension of which is *ferus* (as in Olin) and ferocious. Xinli was the name of a dinosaur race in A. Merritt's *The Face of the Abyss*.

[182] The House of Cron comes from the RPG adventure *Mission to Lianna* (West End Games,).

[183] Obi-Wan said "By the Eternal!" in *SkyeWalkers: A Clone Wars Story* (abelgpena.com, 2015).

[184] The Queen of Air and Darkness was first referenced as a face card in the standard sabacc deck in *Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu*. The title seemed a fitting one for Tilotny. In the real world, it's a reference to Queen Mab, the Fairy Queen, which is an appropriate appellation for Tilotny, who John Stokes drew her to resemble.

[185] The now-ubiquitous blaster had its start with the beginnings of modern space opera, in the pages of *Weird Tales*, in the April 1925 short, "When the Green Star Waned," by Nictzin Dyalhis.

Chapter 26: Clash of the Zhell and Taung

[186] Although Presidents Praji, Shawken, and Lytton are new to this story, the family names of the former two have a long history in the Expanded Universe. House Praji is an ancient clan that goes back 25,000 years, as shown in Nathan O'Keefe's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Praji* (Hyperspace, 2009). The Core world Shawken was first revealed in the pages of *Marvel Star Wars #87*: "Still Active After All These Years" and was shown to be an ancient house in *The Essential Atlas*. In contrast, not much is known of the Lytton Sector in the Core (save for one of its planets, Spira).

[187] Blaming the Taung for the actions perpetrated by President Anaxes on his own territory has echoes of Operation Himmler. This is called a false-flag operation and involves a government that deploys violent actions against its own citizens but dresses it up as if it were the aggressions of an enemy combatant or state; this is done to create a pretext for war, invasion, or some other hidden agenda. The entire Clone Wars was a false-flag operation engineered by Senator Palpatine to attain power, weaken the Jedi Order, and usher in the Empire under his domination.

[188] The Taung gods were first revealed in Karen Traviss' article, "The Mandalorians: People and Culture," in *Star Wars Insider #86* (IDG Entertainment, 2006).

[189] Rexutu the Unconquerable was first mentioned in *The Essential Guide to Warfare*.

[190] The Xylan and their planet-sized droids first appeared in "Trois mini scénarios: Dans la nuit des temps," in *Casus Belli* #66 (1991).

[191] The Branga and Brant storyline comes from "The Terror Planet," by Edmond Hamilton, *Weird Tales* (May 1932); reprinted in *The Collected Edmond Hamilton, Volume 4*; Haffner Press (2013)

Chapter 28: The Thing on the Throne

[192] Although Dutch broadcasters changed the name Drol to Grol over the fact that the former is a common slang word for dung, in fact, older uses of *Drolle* referred to both a "mythological giant or evil spirit" and a "goblin," and potentially kin to the old Norse *Troll*. Before trolls came to be regarded as creatures that lived under tunnels and hills, in Norwegian, Icelandic, Swedish, and Germanic cultures, a *troll* (or *trold*) could refer to a spook, wraith, monster, or ogre, as well as a witch, mage, or conjurer: "Mythical creatures who lure, bewitch or spellbind people." (Wiktionary)

[193] The Chasch were first introduced in Jack Vance's *Planet of Adventure* as a reptilian race, and were introduced in a Star Wars setting in "Où et Quand?" in the French RPG magazine, *Graal* HS4.

Chapter 29: The Ruination of Alashan

[194] *World of Fire* is a bit short to convey such a great concept. But I enjoy it. This expands what that Firstborn Alashanian culture was like and, by extension, the Elder Races.

Chapter 30: The Tempration of Eruthros

[195] *Drômen regn* is Dutch-Danish for "dream kingdom" or Kingdom of Dreams, which leads us to the M'ust civilization and the story of Cody Sunn-Childe (more on that later). Dromund Kaas was first introduced in *Jedi Knight: Mysteries of the Sith* (LucasArts, 1998), an expansion pack to the video game *Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II* (LucasArts, 1997). There has been some confusion over whether the homeworld of the Sith species is Dromund Kaas, Korriban (introduced in *Tales of the Jedi: Dark Lords of the Sith #2*), or Ziost (introduced in *Tales of the Jedi: The Golden Age of the Sith #3*). While Ziost was removed from contention due to being retconned as an adopted homeworld of the Sith species in *Evil Never Dies: The Sith Dynasties* (Star Wars Hyperspace, 2006), the debate remained between Dromund Kaas and Korriban. This work interprets Dromund Kaas as the original homeworld of the Sith species and Korriban as an adopted homeworld. This is based on the most recent source to shed light on the issue, *The Old Republic: Revan* (Del Rey, 2011), which revealed that Dromund Kaas is the "long-lost ancestral homeworld" of the Sith and the "long-lost homeworld of the original Sith species." This is, incidentally, more faithful to Korriban's initial appearance in *Tales of the Jedi: Dark Lords of the Sith*, in which the planet is not depicted as the homeworld of the Sith but rather the final resting place of the Dark Jedi who became the Dark Lords of the Sith.

[196] The paragraph starting with "The effigies" was inspired by Lord Dunsany's "The Sword of Welleran" and "In Zaccarath."

[197] Warth Jek Annonic is a Tuckerism of top-tier contributor Jonathan Renwick.

[198] Lord Laephine and Lady Ghent Juralos are for top-tier contributors Joe Bolton and Liana S.

[199] House Greejatus and Lady Greejatus are for top-tier contributor, Danni Scarpa.

[200] Schinga first appeared in *Geonosis and the Outer Rim Worlds;* Droxine-Etoomveers-Nightmare Demons first appeared in *The Empire Strikes Back Monthly #149*: "Death Masque." Marouflets come from *Casus Belli* #79 (1994).

[201] Gurlanin first appeared in *Republic Commando: Hard Contact*; Felacatian first appeared in the *Star Wars Tales #8* story "Bad Business"; Polydroxol first appeared in "Treasure Hunt," from *Twin Stars of Kira* (West End Games); Pulra first appeared in *Planets of the Galaxy, Volume Three* (West End Games); the Croke first appeared in *Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu*; Proteans first appeared in *The Game Chambers of Questal* (West End Games); the Quarf first appeared in the Season 2 of the *Ewoks* animated series "Baga's Rival."

[202] Shi'ido first appeared in *The Illustrated Star Wars Universe*; Homanan first appeared in "The New Rogues Gallery: Unsung Heroes of the Rebellion", from *Polyhedron #59*; their connection to the Shi'ido is new here. The fantastically bizarre Hooshas come from "The Raith," the fifth episode of the second season of *Ewoks*; Filar-Nitzan first appeared in the article "Shape-shifters," from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #12.* The Polish *filar* means "pillar," while the German *nizan* means "follow." In this reading, Filar-Nitzan can mean, "Follow the Pillar," a reference to the journey in the wilderness when the Israelite camp followed a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. There are additional Yiddish and German meanings for *nutzen* in: "do good for" and "make use of" with *filar* from the Latin *filum*, meaning filament/thread. Filare means "to spin," which brings us to weavers, which puts us in mind of the Fates or Morai. The Ugor come from *Scavenger Hunt* (West End Games, 1989); Phesoj and Airam of the Paradise system are Tuckerisms of Joseph and Maria.

[203] The Hortek first appeared in *The Black Fleet Crisis: Book 1: Before the Storm*; Constancians first appeared in the Star Wars newspaper strip story, "The Constancia Affair." Trowen Arnhem is a Tuckerism of my eagle-eyed proofreader Robert Newnham. The previously unnamed Nilashi come from *Knight Errant: Aflame* #5 (Dark Horse, 2011). Xeniens come from *Zombi* #8 (1997)

[204] Mikan first appeared in *Tales from Mos Eisley*: "Light Duty," from *Star Wars Galaxy Magazine #4*. The term Aceleph refers to the stinging sea nettles, or jellyfish, which is what these shapeshifters resemble in their natural form. *MedStar II: Jedi Healer* mentions a species called the Oni. Oni are traditionally ogres from Japanese folklore, but there is a deeper reference here. In

Michael Reaves and Steve Perry's book, the female Oni is described as having strange abilities and glands in their bodies which allow them to produce electricity and they are described as war-like, and from a planet called Uru. This is a direct reference to the Oni from the 1980s anime and manga series, *Urusei Yatsura*, which heavily referenced *Star Wars*. Thanks to contributor Xavy for helping me parse this.

[205] The Dazouri first appeared in the *Star Wars Tales #19* story "The Value of Proper Intelligence to Any Successful Military Campaign is Not to Be Underestimated"; the Lahsbee first appeared in *Marvel Star Wars #73*: "Lahsbane". Gupin first appeared in the first season of the *Ewoks* animated series "To Save Deej"; Sprites (specifically the Lucksprite) was first seen in "Just My Luck," the 18th episode of the second season of *Ewoks.* Elriss was mentioned in *Allegiance* (Del Rey). The Banakil (which basically means halfling) and many of the connections are new here.

[206] As with the general idea of the Firstborn and their offspring, the idea here was to show how some of the various dragon races had a common origin and also why the noble and powerful Duinuogwuin (and other Firstborn) weren't around in later years to rise up against the Empire. It was never meant to suggest that all of the dragon races came from this union, as even Sine recognizes that there is a mystery quotient involved. The Kadri'Ra first appeared in "A Bitter Winter," published in the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #5*; the Sea Dragons of Drexel II first appeared in *Marvel Star Wars #11*: "Star Search!"; Arkanian Dragons first appeared in *Tales of the Jedi: Knights of the Old Republic*; Krayt Dragons (in skeletal form) first appeared in *A New Hope*; Kell Dragons first appeared in the computer game *Dark Forces*; the Chiaki first appeared in *Marvel Star Wars #76*: "Artoo-Detoo to the Rescue"; Dragonsnakes first appeared in the Dagobah swamp in *The Empire Strikes Back*; Mythosaurs first appeared (as skeletons) in *Marvel Star Wars #69*: "Death in the City of Bone"; Mantigrues first appeared in *The Adventures of Teebo: A Tale of Magic and Suspense*; Menagerie Dragons come from *Knight Errant: Escape #4*; Howlers first appeared in *Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy*.

[207] Aerimus: No known etymology, though "noble" for *Nobbyla* (from the Latin *nobilis*) is accurate. I suspect Sine is being facetious.

Chapter 32: The Eldritch Abyss

[208] Star Wars' connections to the Cthulhu Mythos go back to the very beginning of the Star Wars Expanded Universe in 1978. Typhojem/Pomojema isn't a "third-rate Cthulhu." He IS Cthulhu. When Alan Dean Foster put him in *Splinter of the Mind's Eye*, he was doing what many authors have done, which is to add to the mythos. On November 1, 2024, I asked Foster in an email: "What was the thinking behind including the statue of Cthulhu (as Pomojema) in *Splinter*?"

He replied and said, "As a Mythos fan, I thought it would be cool to, you know, show the universality of it. Across galaxies, even."

[209] Thargorograht seems inspired by Ungoliant, with her name unconsciously derived from Thangorodrim, a volcano in the Iron Mountains raised by Morgoth in the First Age. The Gorog concept was first mentioned as the secret Dark Nest of the Killiks in *Dark Nest I: The Joiner King*. From there, I extrapolated the concept of an insectoid goddess for them and the Wizards of the Night Spirit. As regards the Gorog from *The Force Unleashed II*, although it's more simian in appearance, it could be a descendant, though it's also possible that Gorog was named in homage to Thargorograht.

[210] I created Ooradryl before Waru and *The Crystal Star* came out. Around 1993-4, I wrote an RPG adventure. The premise centered on having to infiltrate the Cult of Ooradryl to stop the predations of a false god who turned out to be a malevolent entity. Ooradryl was a bizarre creature with a modus operandi akin to Thulsa Doom (from the Robert E. Howard's *Kull* stories and *Conan the Barbarian* movie). Although it never saw print, I got paid for it thanks to editor Bill Smith and received credit in the *Gamemaster's Screen* (Revised version, 1996) for my timeline, which I'd been regularly updating and sending to West End Games and Bob Cooper of Dark Horse Comics in the mid-'90s.

[211] Mnggal-Mnggal (pronounced MenGAAL-MenGAAL) first appeared in *The Unknown Regions* sourcebook. With Dan Wallace indicating (in his Endnotes) that the creature was extra-dimensional, it only made sense to include him in the band. Although the entity can be traced to Mordiggian (see note #208), its name derives from M'nagalah, a creature from Ramsey Campbell's 1964 short story, "The Inhabitant in the Lake," who ten years later, appeared as a Lovecraftian adversary in issue #8 of DC's original *Swamp Thing*. Campbell brought him back in "The Tugging" (*The Disciples of Cthulhu*, DAW, 1976). He likely got the M'nagalah name from the legendary Filipino *Aswang* (demon, ghoul, or witch), the Manananggal. Possibly taken from the Tagalog word *tangal*, which means "to separate" (there may be additional derivations), this vampiric entity can separate its upper body from its lower torso, enabling it to grow wings and fly away in search of prey (akin to the *Nukekubi*, a Japanese Yokai). Their appearance is amorphous, but they often transform and even live in Human shape during the day. They generally utilize the female form to better ensnare male victims. At night, their sharp fangs and long, thin tongue are used to enter the orifices of their sleeping prey to suck blood and organs. Their favorite prey is pregnant women (akin to the appetite of the Mesopotamian Lamashtu). Their vulnerability lies in their lower body, which they hide while hunting. Ashes, vinegar, salt, spices, or holy water can prevent reattachment, and if caught unattached when the sun rises, the Manananggal dies. One can actually become a Manananggal by eating belut (duck eggs), particularly if the unhatched chick is still inside.

[212] Mnggal-Mnggal's poem is derived from the titles of nine poems translated from the First Century BC Syrian poet Meleager of Gadara (*Seventeen Ancient Poems Translated from Greek and Latin*, by Thomas McEvilley). An odd choice, to be sure, but I was fascinated by the fact that the titles themselves read like a poem, albeit one with a weird cadence that I thought suited Mnggal-Mnggal. The lines serve as a prophecy for what would become of Tilotny. The original titles are as follows:

Raising the Alarm; Meleager Commiserates with His Soul; Meleager Addresses His Servant Dorkas; Meleager Speaks to a Honey Bee; Instructions for Meleager's Burial; Meleager Reproaches the Dawn; An Address to the Bedside Lamp; Meleager Writes a Poem for the Police; Meleager Puzzled.

A few have noticed that the translation for Mnggal-Mnggal in his version of the poem is Mordiggian. Bit of an Easter Egg there, as Mordiggian is one of the Great Old Ones in the 1934 story "The Charnel God," by Clark Ashton Smith. Smith's description of the entity runs as follows: "[A] colossal shadow [appeared] that was not wrought by anything in the room. It filled the portals from side to side, it towered above the lintel – and then, swiftly, it became more than a shadow: it was a bulk of darkness, black and opaque, that somehow blinded the eyes with a strange dazzlement. It seemed to suck the flame from the red urns and fill the chamber with a chill of utter death and voidness. Its form was that of a worm-shapen column, huge as a dragon, its further coils still issuing from the gloom of the corridor; but it changed from moment to moment, swirling and spinning as if alive with the vortical energies of dark aeons. Briefly it took the semblance of some demoniac giant with eyeless head and limbless body; and then, leaping and spreading like smoky fire, it swept into the chamber."

[213] Translations for Mnggal-Mnggal's questions to Tilotny are: "What country do you come from?" an Assryian phrase. "Peace in you," an ancient Egyptian greeting. "Behold, I set before you this day the blessing and the malediction," the Hebrew transliteration of Deuteronomy 11. Mnggal-Mnggal is attempting to assert his superiority over Tilotny, trying to trip her up with his knowledge of ancient language, history, and culture. Her silence, however, is not confirmation that he has.

[214] In any form, his name is a corruption of several terms, including *menga*, which is Icelandic for a thing that pollutes, a word that derives from the Old Norse *mein*, which is something that causes harm and mischief. The Old English *gāl* is something wanton, lustful, or wicked; Middle-English

adds levity to the mix; the Dutch meaning is that of bile, whereas the Norwegian brings with it madness and insanity. The Chichewan *mngelo* refers to an angel, while *mengele* is reminiscent of the Nazi torturer Josef Mengele, the "angel of death."

[215] Xothians come from "Dark Lord's Conscience," from *The Empire Strikes Back Monthly #155*, though the species name is original to this story. They were first called the J'feh in "Viva Space Vegas: The History of the Marvelous Wheel" (Starwars.com blog); as that name felt a bit out-of-step with the Lovecraftian association that Alan Moore intended (and a little too close to the Jaffa of *Stargate*), I retconned it as being a ruse on the part of the Xothians to disguise their origins.

[216] Ebruchi come from "Command Decision" (*Star Wars Adventure Journal #11*); Galderians come from "Strange Bedfellows," in *Shadis #14*. The Zanibar come from *Crimson Empire II: Council of Blood*, and are here connected to the unnamed species who built the Titan gods and Dyson Sphere of Iokath, from *The Old Republic: Knights of the Eternal Throne*, a connection based on the Zanibar-like appearance of their mummies. The Mairan come from the fourth book of the *Young Jedi Knights* series*: Lightsabers,* and appeared in *Rogue One*.

[217] Lotek'k, aka. The Terror from Beyond, and the World Razer, aka. Eater of Stars, Destroyer of Worlds, comes from *The Old Republic* MMORPG, though the name Athla'giroth is new here. Nilrebmah XIII and the Energy Hydra come from "Le Facteur X," by Philippe Rat and Mehdi Sahmi, from *Casus Belli #115* (1998), though connecting him to the "devil Vauvert" (from that issue) is new here. The English translation comes from Alban Leloup. The Vathyr come from *The Mighty Chewbacca in the Forest of Fear!* (Disney-Lucasfilm Press, 2018)

Chapter 33: Empire of the Necromancers

[218] The cobralike Ssither came from "The Evacuation of Jatee," in *Supernova* (West End Games, 1993). The name and concept were just way too good to leave as some random snake race. Evil serpentine races are classic to fantasy/horror literature, and borrowed from the serpentine Seraphim and *Nachash* in Genesis. The earliest literary Serpent People are from A. Merritt's *Face in the Abyss (Argosy, 1923)*. This was followed by the Serpent Men or Serpent Folk in Edmond Hamilton's "The Hidden World" (*Weird Tales*, July 1929), Serpent People in Robert E. Howard's "The Shadow Kingdom" (*Weird Tales*, August 1929), now a shapeshifting race who worship the Great Serpent, later identified with Yig, the Father of Serpents, from author and Lovecraft collaborator Zealia Brown-Reed Bishop in "The Curse of Yig" (*Weird Tales*, November 1929). Leigh Brackett's wicked Dhuvians are another ("The Sorcerer of Rhiannon," *Astounding*, 1942).

[219] I'm not the first to suggest a crossover between Star Wars and the stories of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Michael Reaves did so when he name-dropped Barsoom as a street on Coruscant (Barsoom Boulevard) in *Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter*. Issues #53 and #54 of the Marvel *Star Wars* series were leftover issues of *John Carter: Warlord of Mars*, which had been written by Chris Claremont and illustrated by Carmine Infantino prior to that series cancellation. Jim Shooter asked Walt Simonson to do what he could to turn them into *Star Wars* stories, which he did, adding a framing story and Leia to several panels. He renamed Barsoom Shiva IV, turned John Carter into Aron Peacebringer, Dejah Thoris into Alisande, Tars Tarkas into Keral Longknife, and Tharks into giant stormtroopers and General Sk'ar. As Star Wars owes a debt to Burroughs, so does a generation of pulp writers who came after and basically populated an unofficially shared solar system. Otis Aldebert Kline, Leigh Brackett, C.L. Moore, Henry Kuttner, Lin Carter, Ray Bradbury, A Bertram Chandler, Michael Moorcock, Clark Ashton Smith, Marv Wolfman, Ralph Milne Farley, George Alec Effinger, and more (with Matthew Arnold's earlier Gullivar of Mars being fit in later). Thus, it seemed fitting to make Urthha's Mars the home for those stories. Thanks to Den Valdron's "Spaceman's Burden" at erbzine.com.

[220] Lord Delavas and his lineage come from top-tier contributor Robert Barber.

[221] The capitulation of the public to radicalization or fascist-totalitarian regimes is a historical reality. "A substantial proportion of people do what they are told to do, irrespective of the content of the act and without limitations of conscience, so long as they perceive that the command

comes from a legitimate authority." *The Sociopath Next Door*, by Martha Stout. "The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist." *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, by Hannah Arendt,

[222] Anetân-Tranth is a Tuckerization of top-tier contributor Nathan Arnett.

[223] The M'ust come from *Star Wars #46: The Dreams of Cody Sunn-Childe* (Marvel, 1981). Based on their cheek tendrils, sloping foreheads, and squat, simian features, they're presented as members of the Eruthros race. Their four clawed fingers and violet coloration could indicate some hybridization or genetic drift that occurred in the millennia since splitting from the Eruthros, or a clan variation.

[224] The idea in the Hexnote is that Sith alchemy does not create new life, as its practitioners arrogantly presume, but rather summons entities from Illathurion or the Charnel Worlds. *Book of Sith: Secrets from the Dark Side* (becker&mayer, 2012) provides evidence for this interpretation. Sorzus Syn's description of the origins of Battle Hydras involves a ritual sacrificing a thousand birds, suggesting demonic summoning rather than alchemical engineering.

[225] The latter part of this speech is taken from Adolf Hitler's might-makes-right speech at Munich on March 15, 1929. His justification for conquest and murder are about as Satanic as they come.

[226] The Hexnote's mention of another Rafa system in the Corporate Sector was a means of retconning the reference to a Rafa system in the *Voyages SF* #13 RPG article, "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star, How I Wonder Where We Are," which was seemingly contradicted by the *Essential Atlas*. The origin of that name derives from the wicked Rephaim or Rapha of biblical, Ugaritic, and Phoenician origin.

[227] In the *Tales of the Jedi Companion*, by the 4,000 BBY time period, it is taboo for the Massassi to be taught the Force, even though like all Sith purebloods, they are Force-sensitive. Undoubtedly, some trained in secret, and there may have been periods in which that law was relaxed or not in place.

[228] The Dark Holocron and the holocron of the Killik Sith Lord indicate that Sith were using holocrons long before the creation of the alleged first Sith holocron by Adas. Those who taught Adas the creation of holocrons, the Rakata, were clearly not the originators of the technology either, as much older Kwa holocrons are seen in the *Dawn of the Jedi* comics.

[229] Lamia Xeel is a Tuckerization of Alex Maciel, who created the EU iceberg video that featured Supernatural Encounters: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DEzI58V4aSo&t=1s

[230] Harla is etymologically indistinguishable from the Horla, an evil, invisible, extradimensional entity from the 1887 Guy de Maupassant story of the same name; the word is a portmanteau that means "the Outsider" or "Outer One." (Lovecraft was also inspired by "The Horla.")

[231] The Hexnote refers to the Windagon or King of the Wind Demons, an etymology built from elements of Ithaqua-Wendigo, Dagon, Pazuzu, Enlil, and others.

[232] The Ice Crypts of the Zhell was first mentioned in *The Black Fleet Crisis: Book 2: Shield of Lies*, though it was in *Coruscant and the Core Worlds* that it was said that ghostly chantings of "Korah Matah" could be heard. The presence of ghostly whispers in Sith temples in *The Old Republic* indicates it was either of Sith origin or an even earlier malign source. The Zhell practice of mummification and indication that spirits haunt their crypts points to contact between the Zhell and the Sith. *Kora* is Hungarian for "early," while *mata* is Polynesian/Malaysian for "eye," hence the "First Eye."

Interlude I: Between the Wildflowers & the Weeds

[233] Eco-warrior: I was uncertain about using a term that might sound too modern, but *The Old Republic* MMORPG has an eco-terrorist group called Eco-Strike.

Book IV: The First Shadow

[234] This is taken almost verbatim from the speech given by the High Lama in the Frank Capra film, *Lost Horizon* (Columbia Pictures, 1937).

[235] From Edmond Hamilton's "The Atomic Conquerors" (*Weird Tales*, February 1927): The original reads: "Besides the tremendous forces that rose and fought and crashed, Mankind was but a mass of tiny, frightened pigmies, running about beneath battling giants. Yet one remembers that it was one of those same pigmies, it was a single embittered, insane man who loosed all of that ancient terror upon us and caused an age-old cosmic feud to flare out in dreadful war, universe struggling with universe in titanic combat, immense, unthinkable….."

Chapter 34: The Empyrean Wars

[236] Xo, here named Xoth, first appeared in *Crimson Empire II: Council of Blood* as the Zanibar world of Xo. In the stories of H.P. Lovecraft, Cthulhu's homeworld is Xoth or Zoth. Additionally, the Yevetha homeworld of N'zoth was once known as New Xoth or New Zoth.

[237] A lot of crossover races here. I won't give them all away. Borzog and Muldren are from *The Seventh Tower* series (HarperCollins). Eitak and Eniram come from *Corridor 7* (IntraCorp-Gametek). J'hagga Ri Kachatki are the Jaggi from *Rescue on Fractus* (Lucasfilm Games). The Gerrn, Qhalla, and Andaxi are from *Return to the Stars*, by Edmond Hamilton (*Stark and the Star Kings*, Haffner Press). Medusæ are from *The Legion of Space*, by Jack Williamson (*Astounding Stories*, 1934). Xorg are from "Jour une autre guerre," in *Chroniques d'Outre Monde* #11 (1988)

[238] The Rozzum is one of the collective names for the variety of creatures and entities loyal to the Old Ones and Ancient Ones. They include the Nytocris, though this list separates the latter so they can be delineated later. As with all lists, time and space don't permit me to go through every one. Altagak come from *Creatures of the Galaxy*; Drouk and Subteroth come from *The Old Republic,* Gellbeast wardogs come from *Polyhedron #86*; Piscator come from *Operation: Elrood*; the Siringana and Shenbit Bonecrushers originate in *The Essential Guide to Planets and Moons*; the dragonlike Khom come from Leigh Brackett's "Martian Quest." Light-emitting Demons come from *RTX Red Rock*. Swokes Swokes appeared in *The Phantom Menace.*

[239] Mnggal-Mnggal utilizes an argument based on the notion of speciesism, the idea that the mightier race has the right to determine what to do with weaker races. A similar argument was made by another monster, Nietzsche, in his book, *The Genealogy of Morals,* to justify and even fetishize the wielding of power by the strong over the weak.

Chapter 35: The Sundered of Skyriver

[240] Much of this is from John Hazlett's excellent article "The Written Word" (Hyperspace, 2010). Wukkar was first mentioned in the *Dark Empire Sourcebook* (West End Games, 1993); Nai-cineoph was likely intended to pay homage to someone in history or fiction, but for the life of me I can't remember who or what! I might have just liked the sound of the name.

[241] The apeish Kordan come from *Jango Fett: Open Seasons #2*; Ma'alkerrites come from *Jedi Dawn* (Boxtree Ltd., 1993); I here combined the two into a single race; Ithullan come from the *Tales of the Mos Eisley Cantina* story ""A Hunter's Fate: Greedo's Tale;" Oblee come from *The Living Force* RPGA adventure "The Price of Business;" Tarong come from *Galaxy Guide 12: Alien—Enemies and Allies*; Balinaka come from *Planets of the Galaxy, Volume One*; Morlings come from the short RPG adventure "Providence," from the French magazine *Avalon #1*; some less-known ones: Merysians come from *The Star Wars Adventurer's Journal* (published by Brian Bird) while the Gryps'gar come from the Online Journal of the starwars-rpg.net, and the Aarice-trian from James B. King's *Rebel Justice* RPGA; the Talormines of Argoth come from Rob Mullin's *Bid the Gods Arise*; Creons come from *Space Precinct: 2040*; Audririans come from *The Last Starfighter* (Universal Pictures, 1994).

[242] Etoomveers is not only a Tuckerism of creator Steve Moore, who invented the Nightmare Demon, Reist, in "Death Masque," it's etymologically interesting in that the Middle-English word *tooms* refers to an empty place, while the Scottish derivation refers to a waste ground. *Veer* comes from the Middle French *virer*, as something that suddenly changes course or direction,

which is what Reist ends up doing when he helps Luke towards the end of his life. Lae Clottis is a Tuckerization of Scott Allie, who then worked for Dark Horse and decided that because *he* didn't like "Death Masque," it wouldn't be reprinted in *Devilworlds*, for which reason it remains one of the few uncolored Star Wars comics.

[243] Dragon Slugs first appeared in the Star Wars newspaper strip, "A New Beginning;" Zillo beasts first appeared in the second season of *The Clone Wars*. Their name given here is new. Morvaks come from *Planets of the Galaxy, Volume One*.

[244] The Nytocris is another name that went through several spellings. Original to this story, they're a collective designation of the many insect races that served Thargorograht. Their name was derived from George MacDonald's Nycteris, from his 1879-80 fantasy *The History of Photogen and Nycteris*, and the Egyptian Queen, Nitocris, who lured her brother's murderers to an underground lair, and let the river in, drowning them. A fascinating character, she's often portrayed as villainous (as Lovecraft does), and is doubted by some historians to have existed. The Nevoota Bee started off as an in-joke between Mike Beidler and Tom Veitch from an off-the-cuff remark the latter made in response to a buzzing sound he heard while watching a VHS copy of *Star Wars*. After Beidler listed the *Scourge of the Nevoota Bee* trilogy on his website, *The Star Wars Literature Compendium*, other authors ran with the joke, including Dan Wallace, who put a Nevoota system in *The Essential Guide to Planets and Moons*, Abel Peña, who canonized the species in "The History of the Mandalorians.".

[245] The Realm of Dreams comes from *The Chronicles of the Shadow War*, by George Lucas and Chris Claremont, which I connected to the Dreamlands of H.P. Lovecraft.

[246] The Expanded Universe features various types of "grey aliens," from Stribers to Duros and Muun. The Interdimensional Beings come from *Indiana Jones 4: Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* with a retcon of the tall, spindly alien in the climax of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Reticul is from *Galactic Battlegrounds*, which allowed me to reference Reticulans. The rest are from various other sources. In *The Complete Making of Indiana Jones* (Del Rey, 2008), Lucas notes that "the aliens came here hundreds of thousands of years ago and set up the human race… the aliens didn't come from outer space but from another dimension." Lucas' concept is the pattern I used for the origin of Humans in the Skyriver galaxy. While the Architects engaged in this, the activities of the Interdimensional Beings run in tandem and harmonious with the experiences told in countless abduction accounts. The term "Bug-Eyes" and Xantar come from the video games, *Indiana Jones and His Desktop Adventures,* which is the follow-up to *Star Wars: Yoda Stories* (LucasArts, 1996-97). Oddly enough, no one seemed to make the connection between the Xantar and the Xan of Algar II (*Planets of the Galaxy, Volume Two;* West End Games). That this managed to get developed as deeply as it did is thanks to Harry Thornton who inspired me to make the connections stronger. The Mylnob name was revealed on the model sheet for the Ewoks episode, "Horville's Hut of Horrors," showing a picture of a grey-type alien.

[247] Cthir of the Ssettogians is a Tuckerization of the original *Tales of the Jedi* illustrator, Chris Gossett, who defined the look of the era. I also liked how this name had elements of both Set and Christ rearranged to hint at the demonic and counterfeit nature of this entity, and the fact that it sounds like Asogians. The original name of this entity also bears some interesting allusions.

Chapter 36: Thralls of the Endless Night

[248] I leave most of this for others to parse. As regards the nomenclature, the *DarkStryder* Campaign had a Brandy MacMillian and *Star Wars Galaxies* had a pilot named MacDougal and Senator Mcnamara. So I had no problem introducing a MacNeill. The name Harod is a reference to Michael Brennan's professor, Harold (for whom *The Godform of Assumption* was dedicated).

[249] Yamm'ka or Yamm Ka is curious. Yamm is the name of the Ugartic god of the sea, the equivalent of the Sumerian Abzu and Akkadian Apsu, the Abyss, or watery deep, personified as an entity of chaos—and so aligned with his consort, Tiamat, Leviathan, or Lotan, and the inspiration for Lothan. In all Ancient Near Eastern versions, these primordial entities were killed

by the gods they made. Ka is the Ancient Egyptian word for the soul that survives death. Yamm'ka is, thus, the returned spirit of Yamm. Leviathans first appeared in *Jedi Academy: Leviathan*. The dragon-like Balyeg first appeared in *Blood Ties: A Tale of Jango and Boba Fett*.

[250] The Behemoth from the World Below was first referenced in *Star Wars* #9-10 (Marvel, 1977). Here, that title is indicated as one given to several related entities. The Sugati come from *Star Wars: Purge: The Hidden Blade*. The Eborsisk comes from *Willow*. Battle Hydras come from *Champions of the Force*. Gruthic Winged Beasts come from *Star Wars Rebels Magazine* #22.

[251] Introduced in *Tales of the Jedi: The Freedon Nadd Uprising*, Krath is the name of a mythological magician-god who was the namesake of a Sith splinter sect. Here, the name is revealed as a real Sith Sorcerer in the primordial age, who is himself named after one of the Sith gods. The description is intended to identify him as the second of three mysterious Darksiders seen in disjointed flashbacks in *Tales of the Jedi 5: The Saga of Nomi Sunrider, Part 3*, with the third having been retconned as a depiction of King Adas in *Book of Sith: Secrets of the Dark Side*. Melkorr comes from "The Tale of the Aiwha Pod," from *Republic Commando: Prima Official Game Guide*. Written by Michael Knight, the name is very clearly a reference to J.R.R. Tolkien's Melkor.

[252] Kreia's dialogue in *Knights of the Old Republic II* includes ominous references to ancient Sith Lords whose apocalyptic powers of Force-drain surpassed even that of the world-devouring Darth Nihilus, who was in comparison only "approaching the pinnacle of his power." These references were designed to set up the scale of the True Sith threat in the cancelled *Knights of the Old Republic III* and are explained here. D'krith/Daritha Nemo Dak comes from *Legacy* #27: "Into the Core" and is another example, like Naga Sadow, of an ancient Sith using the title Darth or Daritha in conjunction with two names, not one, suggesting a gradual change in tradition around the time of Darth Vitiate. Eloy J'deo is a Tuckerism of my friend Joey Lodes, lead guitarist and co-creator of the band Maelstrom. Sanct Vitus, under the name Darth Vitus, was first mentioned in *Behind the Threat: The Sith (Part 5): Antiheroes* (Wizards of the Coast, 2008). Din Grrut and Zelashiel the Blasphemer are from *Book of Sith: Secrets From the Dark Side*. Dakara Ramises is a character original to this work, although astute fans might notice the connection to Dak Ramis, another pre-Republic thinker whose teachings inspired the Dark Force in *Evil Never Dies: The Sith Dynasties.* Nyarhepdreh was invented here as the father of Sokratu and the dreaming Crimson King. Oricon is from *The Old Republic)* and Krayiss II from the "A Tale from the Dark Side," published in the *Tales of the Jedi Companion*. The construction of its library-temple, used by pureblooded Sith Sorcerers until its burial in 14,000 BBY, is dated to sometime prior to 38,000 BBY—an impossible anomaly in prior conceptions of Sith history. Sokratu is introduced as a "neo-Plaristite," an earlier follower of Plaristes' teachings, as suggested by Abel Peña.

[253] The Knell of Muspilli first appeared in *The Unknown Regions*. The authors of that book took the name from the *Muspell*, which in Norse and Germanic mythology referred to the primordial realm of fire which existed to the south of Ginnungagap, from which Matthew Stover got the Gunninga Gap (and Valtaullu Rift) for *Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor*. Muspell appears to derive from the Assyrian *Muštilil*, which referred to the shining morning star, or Venus, the same term from which we get Lucifer in the book of Isaiah and its condemnation of kings who imitate the fallen angel. Here, I joined the world of Knell, renamed Darkknell (from "Interlude at Darkknell" in *Tales from the New Republic*), to the Knell of Muspilli, connecting them to the evil gods of the Charnel Worlds.

Chapter 37: Sorcerers in Black

[254] The idea that the Rakata were bred from Ongree and Gungans is not only Cold Danda Sine having fun with two odd-looking races who happen to have eye-stalks, but a narrative device to take the Rakata down a notch. This isn't to say that they're not powerful but rather to show that they're not as all-powerful or all-knowledgeable as they portray themselves to be.

[255] The Thothnych Manuscript and many of these come from *The Godform Assumption of StarCrow the Wise*. The Dyzan Witches and their *Book of Dyzan* is a play on the fraudulent *Book*

of Dzyan (a name that hearkens to the Belarusian Dzyanis which comes from the ancient Greek Dioynsus), which Helena Blavatasky used as the basis of her Theosophical Society, as did occultist Alice Bailey, Ufologist Desmond Leslie, and charlatan Erich Von Daniken. Blavatsky and others claimed to have received passages from the Atlantean book in trances from Tibetan Masters. Lovecraft and others worked the book into his mythology. Blavatasky's *Book of Dzyan* hoax was later exposed as having been plagiarized from translations of the Hindu religious texts, Vishnu Parana and the Rig Veda, amongst other occult and pseudo-science books of the day.

[256] The worlds in this list represent a constellation of historical outliers that indicate an Empire of the Sith species existed with a vast cartographic spread across the galaxy long before the so-called First Sith Empire was established in the Esstran sector by Dark Jedi, challenging the notion that the Sith people were merely isolated primitives before then. Alpheridies was first mentioned in *Tales of the Jedi: The Freedon Nadd Uprising*, but it is in *Tales of the Jedi Companion* that it was identified as having an ancient Dark Side citadel built by a Sith warlord in a time when the planet, located in the Expansion Region, "was considered a part of the Unknown Regions," which dates it to sometime before 20,000 BBY. Medriaas/Nathema first appeared in *The Old Republic: Revan* (Del Rey, 2011), and was revealed to be home to the artificial intelligence Zildrog even before the Great Hyperspace War in *The Old Republic: Knights of the Eternal Throne*, cementing the concept introduced in this work that the Zanibar and the Sith were allied in a forgotten era. Muzara in the Expansion Region was first mentioned in the *Tales of the Jedi Companion,* with ruins of an extinct Sith-linked civilization considered "ancient" by 4,000 BBY, guarded by believed Sithspawn and an underwater tentacled monstrosity. Tomo-Reth literally means "dangerous books" in Latin and Middle English. It's for this reason that I tend to develop continuity by following the trail of etymological breadcrumbs where it leads. Nilrebmah II, located in the Expansion Region, comes from "Le facteur X" in *Casus Belli 115*. The moons of Nilrebmah II are implied to have once hosted a Sith-worshipping or Sith civilization sometime prior to 7,000 BBY, leaving ruins to be found millennia later. Voss, located in the Tion Cluster, first appears in *The Old Republic*. The Dark Heart, where the ancient entity Sel-Makor is imprisoned, is noted by a Sith researcher as having similar architecture to ancient Sith ruins on Korriban, suggesting an archaic Sith presence. Doan, located in the Halthor sector, first appears in *Darth Bane: Dynasty of Evil*, where it's revealed to have hosted an anachronistic civilization of human colonists who "worshipped the Sith and followed the ways of the dark side" sometime prior to 10,980 BBY, bringing with them Sith talismans and building entire cities buried in the ancient past by volcanic eruptions. Janguine is listed here due to its proximity to Doan and its linguistic ties to the Yuuzhan Vong. Onderon, in the Inner Rim, is revealed to have a Sith armory, already called ancient before 4,000 BBY, in *Tales of the Jedi Companion*, which contains a millennia-old Sith spellbook dating back to Adas' era, justifying the planet's placement here. Arorua, located in the Sertar sector, first appears in "Life, Death, and the Living Force" from *Star Wars Tales* #1, but it's in *Book of Sith: Secrets From the Dark Side* that it's identified by Sorzus Syn as a world reached by the Sith species in the ancient past. Arorua is home to the Squollyhawlk and the Silan, monsters purportedly created by Sith alchemy, revealed in this work to be summoned spawn of the Soulworm. Tascollan is a planet introduced in this work to provide a namesake to the Tascollan Nebula, from *Light and Dark* (Wizards of the Coast, 2000), which the ancient Sith Valik Kodank used as her base of operations in the Great Hyperspace War. Djun refers to the planet more commonly known as Vjun, confirming the spelling used in *Dark Empire II* as an alternative. Its presence in this list would make sense of why Sith flee here following the Great Hyperspace War. Hoth has ancient Sith ruins and is revealed to be the ancient base of Naga Sadow's Massassi assassins in *The Old Republic*, indicating a Sith holding colonized in an earlier time when the Sith had greater knowledge of the wider galaxy. Jaguada first appears in *Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader*, where it's ascribed ancient Sith ties. In the endnotes to John Hazlett's *The Written Word*, it's identified as a world that the ancient Sith spread to in the pre-Republic era. Also in *The*

Written Word, the Kruskan language is revealed to have derived from the Sith language. The planet Kruskan has further Sith connections millennia later. Zabba II, from the NJO book *Destiny's Way*, housed the Cursed Palace; in *Cult Encounters* it's also the previously unnamed jungle planet of Dark Side Pyramids from *Challenge* #65. Thule is first mentioned in *Star Wars Gamer* #3*:* "Bane of the Sith" and is detailed in *Geonosis and the Outer Rim Worlds* as having become home to a Sith stealth regiment at an unknown point prior to the Great Hyperspace War, as well as having been fortified against attack by Sith purebloods leaving the Stygian Caldera some time prior to Sorzus Syn as per *Book of Sith: Secrets From the Dark Side*. This regiment was later joined by Sith devotees fleeing the Great Hyperspace War, setting up an oligarchy of generals advised by Sith priests. This bastion of ancient Sith power would persist well beyond the Battle of Yavin with its own Sith Temple and active Thule Sith Arts Academy, its population, which still spoke the Sith tongue and practiced the ancient Sith traditions, increasing from half a million to nearly a billion in that time. Millinar was first mentioned in *The Star Wars Gamemaster Handbook* as a myth. It was proven to be real in the *Dark Forces Saga, Part 2*.
Malachor V first appears in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords*, where it is revealed to be an abandoned academy-world of the True Sith. In *The Essential Atlas*, it's an early colony outside of Sith Space. In *Book of Sith*, it's a world fortified by the Sith purebloods against attack some time prior to Sorzus Syn.

[257] Raquor'daan come from "The Greel Wood Haven," in *Star Wars Adventure Journal #6.*

Chapter 38: Beyond the Doors

[258] Kel′tarcPei, Ascendent of the Q'rel, is a Tuckerization of my friend and editor Patrick Maes.

[259] See "The Cube from Space," by Leigh Brackett, 1942.

[260] Whether H.P. Lovecraft got the name Mi-Go from the Tibertan "Wild Men" or by simply taking the word "demi-god" and chopping off the d, e, and d, I simply restored the first two letters and used punctuation and capitalization to make it less obvious.

[261] Protoplasmic offspring of the Elder Things, Shoggoths were first referenced in Star Wars lore in the *Star Wars: Episode I - The Phantom Menace* game (LucasArts, 1999) as Shoggth Protoplasmic. You can even see a picture of a little Shoggoth!

[262] Septeraery is a Tuckerization (with the change of t to r) of *Krull* director Peter Yates.

[263] This section serves as an origin story for "The Enchantress of Venus," by Leigh Brackett.

[264] Prince Thagordenia's name was extrapolated from Prince Thag, but the rest of the story comes from C.L. Moore's "The Tree of Life," and has been combined with the work of her protégé, Leigh Brackett, from "The Purple Priestess of the Mad Moon" and "The Shadow Over Mars."

[265] The idea of siphoning life from the sun is new to this story, but the aftereffects, of an offspring of the sun coming forth to play is taken from Leigh Brackett's story, "Child of the Sun" (*Planet Stories*, 1942; collected in *Martian Quest: The Early Brackett*, Haffner Press, 2002)

[266] Since *X-Wing Rogue Squadron: The Phantom Affair* and *Coruscant Nights II: Street of Shadows* featured xenomorphs (from the *Alien* franchise), it made sense to take the crossover at face value. As many surmised, the E'Yautja are the Yautja, Hish, or Predators. Hishyim (*The Last Command*;) and Mengjini (*Specter of the Past*) are Star Wars worlds that are linguistically close to the Hish and Amengi races from the *Predator* universe. The planet Mala first appeared in *Legacy*; Ossians and Malak are the Engineers/Space Jockeys/Pilots of *Alien/Prometheus/Predator*. Krevaaki first appeared (as Bodo Baas) in *Dark Empire*. Their facial features bear an uncanny resemblance to the facial armor worn by the Engineers.

Chapter 39: The Darkening of Skyriver

[267] Ahra Naffi: The Old English *ar* refers to an "angel" or "messenger." J.R.R. Tolkien may have derived the Old Saxon word *Eru* (the title for God in his legendarium) from the same root. The Latin nâf refers to a vessel or ship. So Ahra Naffi could mean the "Vessels of the Angels," or "vessels of the messengers." The stingray-like "Wake Angels" come from Don Bluth's *Titan AE*.

[268] The Kooroo are another extinct and unknown people who left behind shrines on various Outer Rim worlds. The Fellowship of Kooroo was first mentioned in *Platt's Starport Guide* (West End Games). The linguistic proximity of Ooradryl, Waru, Ooru, and Kooroo were too close to pass up on, particularly as the etymology of *kuru* is literally "the laughing death" or "the shaking death."

[269] Felinians first appeared in "Limping Lady," published in *Challenge #64*, though Felin first appeared in "The Felin," in *RolePlayer Independent #8*. It's my contention that they're one and the same (or a close offshoot); the star-shaped Conjeni come from "Treasure Hunt," published in *Twin Stars of Kira* (West End Games); the Balti come from the *Star Wars Tales #6* story "A Hot Time in the Cold Town Tonite!;" Arakhyn, Slughs, and Schizodes come from the *Casus Belli #95* story, "Cantina pour trois, y en a pour quatre!;" Borheks comes from *Star Wars: Bounty Hunter*; Orthar come from *Casus Belli* #44 article, "L'écume de l'espace."

[270] Nala Puak and Exal Paeyn are for top-tier contributors Alan Kaup and Alex Payne.

[271] Giant versions of certain creatures come from classic *Star Wars* video games. Thalassians first appeared in *I, Jedi*; their designation as Sea People is new and based on the meaning of thalassi-an. Iktotchi first appeared in *The Phantom Menace*; Chironians come from *The Crystal Star*.

[272] It's easy to confuse the various Wraiths. Force Wraiths (*Polyhedron 103*) are Shadowguards and Spiritshadows. Space Wraiths *(Ultimate Adversaries)* are a lower caste of Shadow Being from the Charnel Worlds. Dark Side Wraiths ("Shadow of the Dark Side," *Challenge 65*) originate from the offspring of the Maelibi and the races they bred with. They shouldn't be confused with Starweirds *(Ultimate Adversaries)*, which come from the offspring of the Immortal Gods of the Sith and Witch-Queens. Nor are they the Cacodemons ("The Monster," *Star Wars Gamer #2*) which are the Darker entities that came from the Arbrans and possibly others.

[273] The Swamp Demon of Somov Rit was a legend mentioned in passing in Darko Macan's *Jedi vs. Sith #1* (Dark Horse, 2001). His origin story here is new.

[274] Anthon Chijen-Wrynok and Queen Ten-Risck are top-tier contributors, John and Kristen Renwick.

Chapter 40: Empires of Eternal Void

[275] The Grove of the Iconoclast is a reference to the real-world Bohemian Grove and the dark intrigues purported to go on there.

[276] Anubis of the Celegit clan is a reference to ACBagel, creator of the great visual audiobook adaptations of Supernatural Encounters (https://www.youtube.com/@acbagel/videos)

[277] From *The Land Before Time* (Universal Pictures, 1988), produced by George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, and Don Bluth. The rest come from various sources. The Moktar first appeared in *Le Hobbit Fataliste: Fanzine de jeux de rôle #1*. Ubese Thorn-Back War Dragons first appeared in Mark Rekhopf's "Design an Alien" entry in *Galaxy Magazine #7.*

Chapter 41: Battle Hymns

[278] The in-universe etymology of Rolk Mangir is "Horned Death" in the language of the Yinchor-ri and the Czech. Roh means "horn" (in other language groups, *roh* refers to a supernatural being). There was some discrepancy over the correct spelling used in the issue (Marvel #86), but the etymology doesn't point to the correct one, whether Rolk Mangir or Rolk Mahgir. While *mangier* means "eater," a *magirist* is a cook, and in the ancient Greek, *mageiros* refer to a butcher. The "Horned Butchers."

[279] The Sen-Dro are from issue #2 of *The Adventurer's Journal* (Brian Bird).

[280] Shaliz'Na come from *Polyhedron #63*; Pteropus are new here and are basically giant bats.

[281] The Slith first appeared in *Galaxy Guide 2: Yavin and Bespin*; their connection to the Ssither is new. The Tulvaree come from *Wanted by Cracken*, though their image derives from Ralph McQuarrie's concept art for the Mynock, as shown in *The Art of Star Wars Episode V*. The Minatum are the previously unnamed sapient, mutant or home Mynocks. The genetic connection to the Gargoyle race as represented by Gracca (*Ewoks*: "The Crystal Cloak") was a way to preserve the McQuarrie illustration. As to the Minatum name, I chose the supine form of *minō*, which in Latin means: "I drive (animals), I impel, I threaten." The Mynok cousin, Gralloc, first

appeared in *Thrawn: Treason*. The idea of a protector race of Gargoyles was inspired by Michael Reaves and *Rebels* writer Greg Weisman.

[282] The Revwien first appeared as concept art by Ron Cobb in *The Art of Star Wars Episode IV* and in a story in *Droids #6* (Star/Marvel).

[283] Lur come from *Han Solo's Revenge*. H'relac from "Welcome to the Jungle" (*Star Wars Gamer #6*). Fosh first appeared in *Rogue Planet*. Hiit (or Hiitian) come from *Shadows of the Empire: Evolution*. Orryxians come from *Galaxy Guide 9: Fragments from the Rim*. Shistavanen "wolf-men" come from *A New Hope*. The Averist were only ever mentioned (and are yet undescribed) as the natives of Averam (*The Last Command*). Draethos first appeared in *Tales of the Jedi: Dark Lords of the Sith* #3.

[284] Though the conflict here is new, its players were derived from the worlds and races in the Tingel Arm and surrounding areas.

[285] The horselike Equani come from *MedStar I: Battle Surgeons*; the ducklike Sipsk'ud are from Russ Manning's, *Bring Me the Children*; the insectoid Pitrillistians were created by Desset Fabien for the "Design An Alien" in *Galaxy Magazine #7*; Lorrdians first appeared in *Han Solo's Revenge*; Langhesi first appeared in *Rogue Planet* and have the ability to bio-engineer (like the Vong); the Forso is the new name of the race represented by Kaat Thrick-Thrick, who live in Nebula Forso, in *Monsters and Aliens by George Lucas*; Kauronians derive from "A Hunter's Fate: Greedo's Tale," in *Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina*; the Simento and Threk are the names given to the unnamed alien races living on that planet, as represented by mOKDAR 15 and Screen in *Monsters and Aliens by George Lucas*.

[286] Antmuel VI and the Ch'hosk Cave Drawings were referenced in *Heroes and Rogues*. That its people were a formicidae Ch'hosk race known as Proliferans (*Polyhedron #59*) is new here and is based on the word Antmuel.

[287] The Chopani sector and Void of Chopani come from *Underworld: The Yavin Vassilika*; its vast emptiness is here explained for the first time. The Tholian Empire is an interesting story. In the EU, the mysterious Tholian appear in *Yoda: Dark Rendezvous* (Del Rey, 2004), but they're a pre-existing race in *Star Trek* and its spinoff material. Tholians in *Star Fleet Battles* (which is considered an alternate universe) were said to have come from another galaxy and "have designs on exploring alternate dimensions." (https://memory-alpha.fandom.com/wiki/Tholian). They were betrayed by a slave race bio-engineered by them called the Seltorians, who look a lot like Verpine (from the *Star Wars Roleplaying Game*). As it turns out, the Verpine also have a hidden history in which it's theorized that they descended from extra-galactic nomads—stated here to be the Tholians. Additionally, Godoans look suspiciously like Andorians. While the NCC-1701 (*USS Enterprise*) from *Star Trek* that appeared in "A Death Star is Born" is clearly Infinities, it's appearance in the third issue of the *Dark Force Rising* along with a *Star Trek* communicator and three officers wearing unmistakable Star Fleet uniforms (redshirts, blueshirts, etc.), is canonical. The *USS Phoenix* (NCC-65420) appears in *Invasion: Revelations* #3 and bearing that very name, no less! In addition, the Iskalloni (from "The Iskallon Factor," *Twin Stars of Kira*), were directly taken from the Borg, as John Jackson Miller admitted in his endnotes to *Knights of the Old Republic #48*. On *Star Trek's* end, a YT- 1300 appeared in *Star Trek: First Conflict*, and an R2 droid appeared in 2009's *Star Trek* film. In *Deep Space Nine*, an "Alderaan Spaceport" is referenced, and the Breen wear armour identical to that of the Ubese. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, a list of old colony ships and their purposes is given, one which was a "diplomatic mission to Alderaan." In *Star Trek: Voyager*, a species called Nar Shaddan is referenced. As suggested in a later chapter, although each lies in its own dimension-universe, there appears to have been some exceedingly rare travel between the two.

[288] Jaenshi: Ralph McQuarrie based his illustration of Wookiees on John Shoenherr's illustration of the Jaenshi from the cover and interior pages of the George R.R. Martin short story, "And Seven Times Never Kill Man," published in *Analog* magazine (July 1975). It seemed appropriate to pay

back the tribute by including the Jaenshi and their beleaguered world of Corlos. The latter world had an additional history, however, as the dark world of Saagael, who is identified as the Demon Prince and Lord of Darkness from another early Martin story, "Only Kids are Afraid of the Dark," from *Star-Studded Comics #10* (Larry Herndon, 1967). Martin never explained how the former world became the latter, but it seemed to me that the actions of the Steel Angels (in the former story) in conjunction with the pyramids led directly to it. These two shorts can be found in *Dreamsongs, Vol 1* (Bantam-Spectra). This is another rare occurrence of crossing over to another dimension-universe.

Chapter 42: Galaxy of the Vampires

[289] Erleg Litchem is a Tuckerism of my friend, screenwriter, novelist, and SE proofreader, Greg Mitchell. Check out his work at http://www.thecomingevil.blogspot.com/.

[290] Anzati first appear in *A New Hope*, but weren't identified as such until "Soup's On: The Pipe Smoker's Tale," from *Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina*. Their origin story here is new.

[291] Bracken Wrennin is an anagram of top-tier contributor Brennan Renwick.

[292] Anzati influence on the early Sith species comes from *Evil Never Dies: The Sith Dynasties*.

[293] The Vampires of Séhal come from *Revue/Quest* #5.

[294] The White Bird Clan of the Cloud People is from Leigh Brackett's draft of TESB.

[295] Blood Spites come from *Dawn of the Jedi: Into the Void*.

Chapter 43: Shadow Kingdoms

[296] The meaning of the ancient Sith title of "Sedriss" is given in Tom Veitch's *Lightsider*.

[297] There are some interesting connections here to the name or title "Tulukh," which is here identified as a title for the King in Yellow. The Encyclopedia of Arda says that "tulukh" means "yellow" or "golden" as "seen uniquely in the name of the Vala Tulkas. His original Valarin name was said to be Tulukhastāz, translated as 'golden-haired', though this became shortened by the Elves to the more familiar Tulkas. https://www.glyphweb.com/arda/lexicon-T.php. He's noted as being a fierce adversary of Melkor and slow to forgive. His other name is Astaldo. Additionally, the word *tulku* refers to enlightened beings who take corporeal form. Wikipedia notes that "The term 'tulku' has its origins in the Tibetan word 'sprul sku', which originally referred to an emperor or ruler taking human form on Earth, signifying a divine incarnation." The word *tulpa* is a Theosophist mistranslation of tulku. Finally, in Finnish, *tulukset*—from the word *tuli*—means "fire" while the Egyptian *khu* means "spirit."

So, we have the spirit incarnation of a divine emperor with a fiery yellow or golden aspect. No wonder Cthulhu or Kthulhu and Tulukh would have an adversarial relationship.

[298] The Tumulus, the ancient giant mummy, and the Torc come from "Trois mini scénarios: Le Dieu Mort" from *Casus Belli #66*.

[299] Fans of classic arcade games might catch a few references. Wor Tandell was first mentioned in *Star Wars: Rebellion* (LucasArts, 1998).

[300] Pre-Republic philosopher Plaristes was first mentioned in *Droids, Technology and the Force*, but *Evil Never Dies: The Sith Dynasties* attributes the philosophy of the Sith splinter sect known as the Dark Force to his teachings. Rimk, its tower, and previously unnamed Sith builder come from *Dark Tremors*, as does Alkin Neret. While Neret's identification as Dark Lord of the Sith there may seem contradictory to the Rule of Two, *Book of Sith* revealed that Sidious abandoned the Rule of Two in favor of a Rule of One; hence Neret, Lumiya, Starkiller, the Imperial Sith Acolytes from *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed II,* the Brothers of the Sith from *Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II*, the Nightsister Sith witches from *Star Wars Miniatures: Universe*, and the reference that Vader is one particular Dark Lord out of many in the *Star Wars* novelization.

[301] Some fans used the term "Horcrux" (from the *Harry Potter* series) in reference to the artifacts that Sith spirits bind their spirits to. It's called a phylactery here.

[302] The Priests of the Game and Babylon XIII come from "La loi de l'Entropy," in *Casus Belli* 83.

Chapter 44: Broken Covenants

[303] As with the Parliament of Trees in *Swamp Thing*, the Neti draw from Tolkien's Ents and the Forest of Fighting Trees in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

[304] The Ergesh were first mentioned in *Planets of the Galaxy, Volume Two*; M'shinn first appeared in *Galaxy Guide 12: Aliens—Enemies and Allies*; the Pliith first appeared in "Breaking Free: The Adventures of Dannen Lifehold," from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #1*; the Bouncers first appeared in *Dark Forces: Rebel Agent*; I like these guys and gave them the species name Rotia, which is based on the Latin word *Rota* and connected them to the Roti system.

[305] The Hepsalum Tash come from the "Design An Alien" contest in *Star Wars Galaxy Magazine 8*; Alzerki come from *Terres des Brumes* #5.

[306] Mirialan and Umbarans first appeared in *Cloak of Deception*; Firrerreo and Ghostlings first appeared in *The Crystal Star*; Teevan first appeared in *Jedi Quest: The Way of the Apprentice*; Ubese were first described in *Shadows of the Empire Sourcebook*; Vultan first appeared in *Tales of the Jedi*; Lorrdians first appeared in *Han Solo's Revenge*; Dantari first appeared in *The Jedi Academy Trilogy: Volume 1: Jedi Search*; Ogemites first appeared in the *Tatooine Sojourn*; Sylphe first appeared in "La Veuve Noire," in *Avalon #2*; Pantorans first appeared in "Trespass," in *The Clone Wars*; Ovoni first appeared in *Purge: The Hidden Blade*. The term Abhumans comes from William Hope Hodgson's novel *The Night Land* and Ongar comes from "The Red World of Polaris," by Clark Ashton Smith.

[307] Cormond was named after the political progenitor of House Cormond, which was first mentioned in the novel *Tarkin*. Cormond later became the capital of Brentaal IV, as seen in "Into the Core Worlds" from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #7*.

[308] Tramnians come from "El Espiritu del Jedi" from *Rosa Negra #1*

[309] Korsalenas L'Starmonde is a Tuckerism of top-tier contributor Oskar Elenas Landstrom.

[310] The Uukaablians come from *The Kathol Outback*. Drowd'dased, Kwyis Nergall, H'yashender are based on Edward Dodds, Kyle Rawlings, and Ryan Shepherd.

[311] The Night Beast, later named Kalgrath, has an interesting history. Originally from the Star Wars newspaper strip "The Night Beast," the creature starts off as an unnamed green reptilian being discovered in the ruins of Yavin 4. Luke probes the creature's mind to discover that he's merely a guardian who attacked them because he thought they were "the ancient enemy." So Luke sends him on a ship to go after his lost people. Goodwin was clearly tying in this story to the earlier Keeper and Alashan storylines of races who departed in the face of a mysterious and powerful ancient enemy (this list might include the Arbran's story from *Star Wars #67*: "The Darker," as Goodwin was editor of the series at this point). Unfortunately, Kevin Anderson didn't pick up on this and instead had the Night Beast transformed thematically and literally into a spiky, red-skinned Massassi Warrior. In *Tales of the Jedi: The Sith War #6*: "Dark Lord," he's put into stasis by Exar Kun. Aside from the bizarre physical differences between the two, Anderson's retcon doesn't make sense since it makes the Night Beast's "ancient enemy" the Jedi. This is implausible for several reasons: a) Luke's probe of his mind would have revealed the Dark Side, and b) Kalgrath would have recognized Luke as the ancient enemy. My fix for this was to restore the Night Beast to his guardian status, and have him awaken upon the incursion of the ancient enemy—the Old Ones and the Immortal Gods of the Sith. Exar Kun's transformation of him was temporary.

Chapter 45: Immortal Gods of the Sith

[312] Darth Vader swore by "the Immortal Gods of the Sith" in the sixth issue of the original Marvel comics adaptation of *Star Wars* way back on September 13, 1977. It's astounding to me that in the forty-five years of EU history, none of the authors or editors ever thought to develop that. It's my belief that these and their monsters (e.g., the Behemoth from World Below) were what Archie Goodwin was setting up as the ancient enemy that had so terrified the galaxy's earliest races.

[313] Though fashioned in replica of the Earthworlds, the pseudo-Earthworlds were established after the outbreak of the Empyrean Wars without the involvement of the Architects and aren't true Earthworlds.

[314] Sithlan comes from the Etruscan god of fire, Sethlan, who is believed to be the equivalent of the Roman Vulcanus. To help me keep straight all the titles, ancient names, relationships, symbols, and potential crossover names of the various evil deities, I created a document for the Ancient Ones.
[315] The Cold One comes from top-tier contributor Alex Martin. The name Xander Gora refers to his lineage that will lead to Count Gora of Serenno and the Bando Gora, but it also allowed me to Tuckerize translator Alexander Vinogradov.
[316] The Flamewind comes from *Lando Calrissian and the Flamewind of Osseon*.

Book V: The Second Shadow

[317] Taken from William S. Burroughs' "The War Universe," a taped conversation first published in *Grand Street, No. 37* (1991). The original reads: "This is a war universe. War all the time. That is its nature. There may be other universes based on all sorts of other principles, but ours seems to be based on war and games." Burroughs was decrying this state of affairs. Dengest is using it as justification.
[318] From the poem, "Ecclesiastes," by Clark Ashton Smith (based on the Book of Ecclesiastes). The section runs thus: "Old lover of the sun, who sorrowed thus/Death too is but illusion, cheating us/Happy is he, at one step freed of strife/Always I hear, with frightened ears attending/Amid the frenzy and horror never-ending/The long, long roaring of eternal life."
[319] The giants of Mercury is from a story told in Leigh Brackett's "Shannach—The Last" (Planet Stories, 1952; collected in *Shannach—The Last: Farewell to Mars*, by Haffner Press, 2011).

Chapter 46: The War of Temporal Planes

[320] Bartokk first appeared in *Young Jedi Knights: Lightsabers*; Flakax come from *Galaxy Guide 4: Alien Races*; Sikurdians first appeared in Marvel *Star Wars #7:* "New Planets, New Perils!;" the giant preying-mantis Yam'rii (or Huk) first appeared in *A New Hope*; Noehon first appeared in the *Star Wars Campaign Pack*; Geonosian Hydras come from *Coruscant and the Core Worlds*; Merdeth come from *Geonosis and the Outer Rim Worlds*; Orray come from the arena scene in *Attack of the Clones*.
[321] The Jennoshim who becomes the Dark Crystal is an anagram of Jim Henson and the hero of Thra, Jen. The name works also as Jen (Sith for "hidden" or "dark") Oshimai (Japanese for "ending") or Jen Oshimu ("hidden regret"). The real world Jen comes from the Welsh *Gwyn* (both Jennifer and Guinevere derive from it), which meant "white" or "blessed"—the very opposite of its Sith definition, which makes sense given that the Sith perverted the original tongue of the Firstborn. The uncanny similarities between *Dark Crystal*'s Skeksis, Halosians of *Farscape*, Arakkoa of *World of Warcraft,* and Carrin of *Gamma World* are not coincidental, as they were all explicitly designed to look like the Skeksis (*Farscape* was produced by the Jim Henson Company and used the same Skeksis frameworks), with the Arrokoans said to have possibly come from "some other world," as per the Alien Species wiki. The Chistori from *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast* have a close-enough appearance, albeit with some dinosaur aspects, to have warranted a family tie.
[322] The Korendum crystal and *Gorgorror* come from "La légende des cristaux," in *Casus Belli* 76.
[323] Thanks to Alex Martin for the research that helped properly guide the Bando Gora section.
[324] The Red Nebula and its gems first appeared in "The Crimson Forever" from *Star Wars #50*.

Chapter 47: Cycles of the Damned

[325] This confirms the long-held supposition that Arren Kae is the true name of Kreia (which is stated to be an alias in *Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords*), with her title of Darth Traya being taken in honor of Lord Trayus and his Academy. "There must always be a Darth Traya," she said in reference to the long legacy of her title. Daritha Trayus is intended to be the founder and namesake of the Trayus Academy from *Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords*.
[326] Frix comes from *The Adventurer's Journal* #1 (2018).
[327] Amongst the more famous members of the Hysalrians was Yoda's master, N'Kata Del Gormo.

[328] Zarians come from *The Politics of Contraband*; the Sorki or Sorkis of Serob 6 come from the French RPG article, "La Révolte d'Acier: Épisode 3," from *Backstab #30*. The purple Throg race comes from the animated *Lost in Space*. I gave the unnamed world in that pilot the name Nasika, from *Nasikabatrachus sahyadrensis*, the scientific name for the purple frog found in India.

[329] The Melodies (who are essentially prototypical mermaids) come from the second *Junior Jedi Knights* book, *Lyric's World*. They and other creatures of Yavin 8 being possible creations of Sith alchemy was a link first made by Jason Fry and Dan Wallace in *Geonosis and the Outer Rim Worlds*. Their presence and ruins on Yavin 4 (of which Sith archaeologist Talos Drellik says "the dates are all wrong") are stated to have similarities to the architecture of Zakuul in *Star Wars: The Old Republic: Shadow of Revan*, and are connected to artifacts and an altar capable of summoning the eldritch entity called the Ancient Threat, all pointing to a Sith presence in the system in the pre-Republic era.

[330] Beck-tori first appeared in *The Power of the Jedi Sourcebook*; Drugons first appeared in *Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II*; Miridon first appeared in "The Pirates of Tarnoonga," from the animated *Droids*; Chiaki first appeared in *Star Wars #76*: "Artoo-Detoo to the Rescue." The name for the father of the Altathat, the "Unidentified dianoga-like species," is called here Alththamin'eshr, which is the Arabic word for the number 18. The unused alien maquette for the creature, built for *Return of the Jedi* was called "Alien 18." *Altathat* is a Hungarian word for one who causes others to sleep, in this case, the sleep of death. A member of this species appeared in *Shadows of the Empire: Evolution*. Drallish mermaids are from *Suns of Fortune*. Noga Mak'tu comes from the FFG *Edge of the Empire* supplement, *Lords of Nal Hutta*.

[331] Trayus is reminiscent of the word "betrayal" and is a derivation of the French *traire,* which refers to the drawing, pulling, and firing of an arrow. Aqua Bloaters come from the *Star Wars Online Journal, Vol 2, #4* (starwars-rpg.net/journal, 2002).

[332] Trayus' cosmic engineering, aside from fulfilling Chris Avellone's visions for the technological capabilities of the True Sith as detailed in various interviews, explains the unlikely coincidence of multiple habitable Sith worlds located in two systems: Dromund Kaas, Dromund Fels, and Dromund Kalakar's moon of Kalakar Six in the Dromund system, and Malachor II, III and V in the Malachor system, with Malachor II likely representing the Malachor seen in *Rebels*.

[333] Sidharth Daikin is named for top-tier contributor Ethan Robert Johnson.

[334] Much of this material serves as a prequel to *Willow*, written by George Lucas and directed by Ron Howard, and its *Shadow War* trilogy of novels by Chris Claremont and George Lucas. On April Fool's Day of 2006, Lucasfilm added these to canon, and although presented as a joke, Leland Chee admitted it was a serious consideration, an idea that was met with approval by many fans, myself amongst them. Dave Filoni also considers Willow and Star Wars part of the same larger universe: https://www.starwars.com/video/questions-answered-nass-orphne-and-willow-the-clone-wars.

[335] Koda's World and the Tempestro come from "The Prize: A Scout Adventure," in *Galaxy Guide 8: Scouts*. The Abominor were first mentioned in *The New Essential Guide to Droids*, in which the Great Heep (from the animated *Droids* special—now listed as S2 of *Droids* on Disney+) was established as one. That book also established their war with the Silentium, who were identified with the droid race to which Vuffi Raa (*The Lando Calrissian Adventures*) belonged.

[336] Although named here for the first time, the information about the Kab-Ell comes from "Alliance Scouts: The Infinite Quest," published in *Casus Belli #48*. Special thanks to Alban Leloup for the translation. The spheres' name is also new to this story as is their connection to the Mu-Ab.

[337] Connecting the Abominor to the terrifying villain from the *Sinistar* arcade game was playful stitching. Conceptually the two are quite similar.

[338] The material on the Sumrians comes from an interview with author Greg Gordon who never got to develop them beyond a brief mention in *The Imperial Sourcebook*. The interview can be found here: http://deckplans.00sf.com/Research/Q_and_A.html.

[339] Grueshite was a surprising addition to *Star Wars Screen Entertainment*, as it means the dung of a Grue. Grues are savage creatures of darkness that come from the classic *Zork* home video games. This is no accident, as the creator of the former, Mike Kennedy, also worked for Activision, who purchased Infocom and produced the four graphical *Zork* adventure sequels. This section pays back the favor.

[340] For more on this, see *The Book Of Skaith* trilogy by Leigh Brackett.

Chapter 48: Behind the Veil

[341] Markath was a Human sage who lived in a forest by the River Troon. He possessed a giant tome. (*The Willow Game*; Tor Books, 1988).

[342] Jesek Bentvine is a Tuckerization of Kevin Beentjes, a molecular biologist in real-life, though not a Whiphid, and the creator of the website that features detailed breakdown of all the races in *Supernatural Encounters*, which was so well-done and detailed, I had to pay tribute to its creator.

[343] Lord Zeoran-Eepaax is a Tuckerism of Noah Alexander Lopez, a filmmaker who created a video pitch of *Supernatural Encounters* in an attempt to spark interest in a film adaptation.

[344] The Jerni come from "Dark Knight's Devilry," in *The Empire Strikes Back Monthly* #153.

[345] The fact that Kashyyyk is not the original homeworld of Wookiees goes as far back to the start of the EU with *The Wookiee Storybook*.

[346] A lot of this is intended to explain the contradictory parentage of Cthulhu, with names being assigned different roles (including some that were later personified in Mythos lore), and how Typhojem/Cthulhu is both the daughter of Tilotny (the Might Mother) but not. And the fact that her essence was stolen from her home, which the Dark Powers called Ptmâk, which Clark Ashton Smith likely took from the Czech word pták (which I won't translate here), allows him to have been around from at least the time the Charnel Worlds first appeared (if not earlier) and later again when the Sine and Ap re-birth him without his prior memories.

[347] Literature has a long history of adaptation and rearrangement that's often a tribute to the original source material. While some have instead gone out of their way to overwrite and deconstruct older stories with a postmodern spin, my intent with the Cthulhu Mythos was not to deconstruct it, but to maintain the narrative and concepts within the context of the ancient Skyriver galaxy. Lovecraft's protagonists and monsters aren't exactly trustworthy or reliable witnesses, which may indicate that the Necronomicon and Cthulhu Mythos are a narrative informed by the perspective and lies of the Outer Gods. Nonetheless, though it's been assumed by some that *Supernatural Encounters* is Lovecraftian, as *Cult Encounters* seems to have suggested, it's not and has never been. If anything, SE is *Klarkashtonian*, meaning that it's thematically wedded to the ethos of Clark Ashton Smith. SE incorporates the Cthulhu Mythos in the same vein of anti-modernity that Lovecraft intended, to upend the proud conceit of humanity, the vanity of the Gilded Age and its proud achievements that caused many to boorishly boast of mankind as the unconquerable masters of the universe. But whereas Lovecraft's cosmicism was borne of nihilistic materialism, Smith was a Romanticist who held a deep disdain for the materialism and scientism of his age, which he saw as not only arrogant but false. Cosmicism in SE is thus revealed as hollow. Humanity is neither insignificant nor at the mercy of an uncaring, empty cosmos, but in the midst of a cosmic battle between vast intelligences, of which benevolent forces will ultimately prove triumphant.

[348] Mechu-deru is here expanded from "Droids, Technology and the Force: A Clash of Phenomena."

Chapter 49: Behold the Queen of Air & Darkness

[349] Although never published, the original given name of Kligson by Rich Handley and Abel G. Peña in the Star Wars Blog article, "Viva Space Vegas! The History of the Marvelous Wheel," was Vernen. With the new Marvel series citing it as Tarr, it was just a matter of putting them together.

[350] The Menahune are members of a small, hidden race in Hawaiian mythology, purported to have magical powers. This gave birth to the Menahuun of "Reckonings," from *Star Wars Gamer #7,*

which demonstrated that inhabitants of the Star Wars universe are familiar with Gremlins in their classic iteration as mischievous beings who sabotage ships.

Interlude II: The Problem of Droid Abuse

[351] This delves not only into how Hextrophon came upon his conclusions in the article, "The Problem of Droid Abuse" (found in *The Farlander Papers* but credited to Hex in "Droids, Technology and the Force: A Clash of Phenomena"), but the Hexnote retcons the contradictions in "A Call to Reason."

Chapter 50: Black Science

[352] The Taurannik Codex and Muurshantre Extinction come from Matt Stover's *Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor*, where the Codex was said to have been destroyed a hundred thousand years earlier in that conflict. The Codex is depicted as a Dark Side document. This clarifies that the original Codex was a historical document of the Muurshantre. Cronal, retrieving fragments of the Codex, created his own version based on it. In other words, the Taurannik Codex that now exists would better be regarded as the Pseudo-Taurannik Codex. Muurshantre, or muur-chantre/muur shantey means "wall of song" (or "wall of singers"), which led to the way I depicted the events in this chapter. The tentacled Muur were first mentioned in the *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game* and their linguistic similarity to Muurshantre couldn't be ignored.

[353] Named for its inventor, Richard Jordan Gatling, who invented the rapid-firing, multiple-barrel firearm in the American Civil War, Gatling naively believed it would "supersede the necessity of large armies, and consequently," diminish "exposure to battle and disease." Gatling guns were mentioned in *River of Chaos*, *Boba Fett: Bounty on Bar Kooda*, and Tartakovsky's *Clone Wars*.

[354] The events of this chapter, including the Dark Overlords of the Universe and the Nexus of Sominus, come from the film, *Howard the Duck*, executive produced by George Lucas and written and directed by Gloria Katz and Bill Huyck, the comic-book adaptation, the *Howard the Duck: The Menace from Outer Space* coloring book adaptation (Marvel Books), which features the Dark Overlord as a tentacled being, and the video game sequel, *Howard the Duck: Adventure on Volcano Island*. Howard the Duck is a property of the Marvel Universe, which relegates the film and its spin-offs to their own Earth-58470; the comic-book Howard is from the mainstream Earth-616 dimension. For this reason, and because it's *Howard the Duck*, I resisted for a long time, going back and forth with ways in which it could work. Since my mantra was "no stone unturned" for Lucas projects, I pressed ahead, encouraged by my friends Xavy and Harry. Incidentally, comic books exist in-universe, as first revealed in *Star Wars Missions #6: The Search for Grubba the Hutt*. Both Star Wars and the Marvel Universe share the Gunninga Gap (though Marvel spells it as the Norse did, Ginnungagap) and Muspell (Muspelheim or Muspilli, the fire-realm found in its southern reaches). In Marvel, it's one of the Splinter Realms (aka. the Archipelago of Anguish and Redemption)—a Dark Dimension broken into numerous smaller Hell-like dimensions, one of which is Sominus—from which come the Dark Overlords of the Universe. The ruler of Sominus is Thogg, one of the Hell-Lords and Lords of the Splinter Realms. Although the term "Dark Overlord" or "Dark Overlord of the Universe" doesn't factor into the mainstream Marvel Universe, it can reasonably be assumed that it's another title for one of these groups. Incidentally, one of these realms is the Outer Dark which is the dwelling place of Marvel's iteration of the Great Old Ones. The MCU (Earth-199999) has had its own interesting crossovers, particularly via *Guardians of the Galaxy*, e.g., "Hoojib oil" is something Yondu uses for his boots and The Collector has a note from XS-Tech. Note that though it may be its own dimension, none of this dictates that the Marvel multiverse, history, or existence is "true" in total or part. Palmopates come from *Chroniques d'Outre Monde* #15, which mentions a species called the Palmopates, that are explicitly described as looking like Howard the Duck.

Chapter 51: Astounding Adventures

[355] "Astounding Adventures" is an ironic take on the old John W. Campbell magazine, *Astounding*.

[356] Shanga is a plot point in "The Beast-Jewel of Mars," by Leigh Brackett (*Planet Stories*, 1948), while the incursion of trade cities in the solar system comes from several of her tales. Shanga's tie to lycanthropy magic is new to this story, though the idea comes from "The Enchantress of Sylaire," by Clark Ashton Smith (*Weird Tales*, July 1941). Mnemoka comes from the fragment "Mnemoka," by Clark Ashton Smith.

[357] This conflict between the east and west and Generals Sheridan and Brody comes from third-person shooter video game, *Fracture* (Lucasarts, 2008)

[358] Karness Muur and the Rakghoul Plague are from "Vector" in *Knights of the Old Republic* #25-28.

[359] Ciranous and the Ecothom come from top-tier contributor James Dyer. The Mothman legends have long fascinated me.

[360] The Starfarer is a reference to Vonda McIntyre's four-book *Starfarer* series.

[361] Xendron come from Noah Falstein's *Koronis Rift*, by Lucasfilm Games/Activision/Epyx.

[362] These names are a tribute to the Amalgamated Dynamics artists who worked on the practical effects of the 2011 prequel to the Thing, effects which were discarded due to the interference of studio heads who ran test screenings where audiences said the film "felt too '80s." Lord Varzad Ramyan is Farzad Varahramyan, who designed the pilot's head, while the Ordu-Schell is Jordu Schell, who did the finished creature design.

[363] While the Rykor and Kaldane derive from *The Chessman of Mars*, by Edgar Rice Burroughs, their ties to Edmond Hamilton's "The Great Brain of Kaldar" is new, as is Metadyn and the Sarmak.

Chapter 52: Dejarik

[364] Dejarik is the holographic chess game that goes back to the original *Star Wars* film. I'd always pondered the reason these particular creatures were the ones represented in this game.

[365] The Caliginous Automaton of Tomo-Reth was first reference in *The Essential Atlas*.

[366] The Brass Soldiers of Axum comes from *The Essential Atlas*.

[367] Essuline is new here and refers to Esseles, the world they're on, the real-world convent of Ursuline, and the Essenes of Qumran. Calamar, as the region is called millennia later, was first referenced in the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #6* (in the Galaxywide NewNets) and featured in several of Scholastic's *Episode I Adventures* and *Star Wars Adventures* books.

[368] Edy Uar was named for the daughter of my friend and top-tier contributor, Christopher Nelson, as Topher was named after him.

[369] The Horn of Vanukel is named after my friend and proofreader, Luke Van Horn.

[370] Consumption (or tuberculosis) was first referenced in *Star Wars: The Roleplaying Game*.

[371] The Scrimp and Bulbous come from Phil Tippett and Jon Berg's original ten-figure holochess set, which Lucas cut down to eight due to the size of the board.

[372] Lady and Dorelle Asher come from top-tier contributor Debbie Sellers. Eckhart the Adder comes from Win Scott Eckert of the Wold Newton Universe fame, and Justin Eckhart of Eckhart's Ladder. The surrounding lore in that paragraph comes from the film *Galaxy of Terror*.

Chapter 53: Enigma of the Absolute

[373] Carcerot is a Tuckerization of top-tier contributor, friend, and editor, Corey Carter.

[374] The Basis and Temple of the Headless Snake come from *Darth Vader and the Ninth Assassin*.

[375] The 1996 Capcom arcade game *Star Gladiator* was intended to be a *Star Wars* game. Now, in a sense, it is. Its sequel was called *Plasma Sword*.

[376] XS-Tech and some of this history is from the "ExtraTERRORestrial Alien Encounter" theme-park attraction at Tomorrowland in Walt Disney World. Originally based on Ridley Scott's *Alien*, it's included here because of George Lucas, who worked on the project.

[377] Caltinia is from *Star Wars #83*: "Sweetheart Contract." Its history comes from *Titan AE*.

[378] Much of this stems from the 1928-9 Interstellar Patrol stories of Edmond Hamilton which popularized the space opera subgenre. Just as Urthha's system is home to Burroughs, Brackett, Smith, Lovecraft, and Moore, the Earthworld of Sol is home to many (but not all) of the stories of Hamilton and Gerry Anderson, the latter because he shares the portrayal of Humans as coopera-

tive, noble, heroic, and smart. They also feature stories in which aliens and Humans live in a contented, cooperative state save for a few bad apples. I think this offers a good balance to some of the less noble traits we see in other Human histories in SE. Though the Zoromes are from Neil R. Jones' stories, Jones pretty much took them from Hamilton's unnamed aliens in the 1928 story, "The Comet Doom." Many of these tales require the presumption of unreliable narrators and/or deceptive aliens. As to the Astran Empire from *Fireball XL5*, who go on to appear later in *Doctor Who*, it can be said the Astrans either originated from or departed to another dimension.

[379] Pretty much all of the aliens on this list come from Edmond Hamilton's Interstellar Patrol series, which he wrote for *Weird Tales* in the 1920s. They've since been reprinted by Haffner Press in *The Star Stealers: The Complete Tales of the Interstellar Patrol, The Collected Edmond Hamilton, Volume Two* (2009).

[380] After he became friends with William Shatner, Lucas considered naming the Neimoidian race "S'hatnarians" after him.

[381] The Oracle of Pelgrin comes from the *Power of the Jedi Sourcebook*.

[382] Fael Murinn is a Tuckerization of friend and proofreader, Neil Farnum. Gualileum is a Tuckerization of SE artist Guillaume Ducos. Tianon Amilius is a Tuckerization of friend and Legends Library podcaster Liisa Mountain.

[383] That last sentence was quoted directly from Brian Daley's *Requiem for a Ruler of Worlds* (Del Rey, 1985), where it's noted to be an ancient saying.

Chapter 54: Across that Dreary Coast

[384] El'Shuddem is a play on Shudde M'el, a giant and tentacled annelid who serves as the wicked king of the Cthonians in Brian Lumley's *Titus Crow: Vol 1: The Burrower Beneath* (Daw, 1974).

[385] Silans, Barracles, Glooths and Squollyhawlks first appeared in *Star Wars Tales #1's* "Life, Death, and the Living Force"; I don't recall where the Faroe comes from; Schinga first appeared in *Geonosis and the Outer Rim Worlds*; Sith Wyrms in *Tales of the Jedi: Dark Lords of the Sith 4: Death of a Dark Jedi*, Nharqis'Al first appeared in "The Longest Fall," in the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #11*.

[386] While popularized by the Sandworms of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, giant, dangerous annelids can be traced back to H.P. Lovecraft's Dholes (or Bholes), from 1932's "Through the Gate of the Silver Key," a name he and his co-writer E. Hoffman Price likely took from Arthur Machen's Dôls (though Machen never described them), and "The Coming of the White Worm," by Clark Ashton Smith (1941). And those may have been taken from the folklore of various cultures. There are a lot of giant predatory worms in *Star Wars*. Luke alone encountered half a dozen in his time. Kdak first appeared in the *Star Wars* newspaper strip "As Long as We Live"; Wuffa Worms first appeared in *The Courtship of Princess Leia*; the Hulgren first appeared in *Droids: The Kalarba Adventures #6*; the Wandrella first appeared in *Splinter of the Mind's Eye*; the K'lor'slug as a dejarik piece in *A New Hope*; the Burrowers/Sand Burrowers) in *Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy*; Kargul come from "Endor and the Moddell Sector" (*Star Wars Gamer #9*); Tikulini (which sounds like a corruption of Tilotny) from *Vader's Quest #3*; Spice Eels in "The Free-Trader's Guide to Sevarcos," in the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #2*; Exogorths first appeared as the "space slug" in *The Empire Strikes Back*, identified as an Exogorth in *Knights of the Old Republic #18.* Yri worms come from the *Living Force Campaign Guide*. Sliideptra come from *Creatures of the Galaxy*.

[387] As far as I see it, Belot's adventures on Venus were told in Leigh Brackett's "Terror Out of Space" (*Planet Stories*, 1944; reprinted in *Lorelei of the Red Mist*; Haffner Press, 2007).

[388] From "Stark and the Star Kings," by Edmond Hamilton and Leigh Brackett (Haffner Press.)

[389] This speech has echoes of Roy Batty's speech in *Blade Runner*. Philip K. Dick presented a longer and more eloquent one in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Oddly enough, that same year featured very similar dialogue in Edmond Hamilton's 1968 *Return to the Stars*.

Chapter 55: The Fearful Potencies of Night

[390] Nape Bela is a tuckerization of friend and contributor Abel Pena.

[391] Black Angels comes from Roger Christian's short film *Black Angel*, which Geoge Lucas had commissioned to be played before *The Empire Strikes Back*. The Urumolki come from *E.T. The Book of the Green Planet* (Putnam, 1985). The etymology is sound.
[392] The Azrayl come from top-tier contributor Jonathan Karnis; the End Lords from Patrick Maes.
[393] Jandoon has interesting etymology: *Doon* or *dun* refers to ancient fortifications, while *jan* can refer to a jinn or something that eats away or corrodes. Given that Jandoon is a planet of ruins, this is appropriate. *Janoon* is the singular of the Finnish *jano*, referring to thirst, desire, lust, and greed. And if transferred to *Jen*doon, then we have "Dark" or "Hidden Fortifications."
[394] The Asogian world and culture comes from William Kotzwinkle's *E.T. The Extraterrestrial* (based on a screenplay by Melissa Mathison; Putnam, 1982), its sequel, *E.T. The Book of the Green Planet* (Putnam, 1985), and other ancillary E.T. media.

Chapter 56: Scourge of the Suns

[395] *Nil-Apharas*: Though its name is new to this story, the ship belongs to the cult of Five, and first appeared in "The Pandora Effect" (*The Empire Strikes Back Monthly #151*). It was brought to my attention after the initial beta release that Nilapharas spelled backwards is Sarah Palin. While I have no problem acknowledging my dislike for this American politician, or the vast majority of them for that matter, I have no memory of having done this. Plus, I almost never do backwards-spelled names. *Nil* and the Romanian *afară* might mean "outside nothing" or the void.
[396] Garn first appeared in "Blind Fury!" (*Star Wars Monthly #159*). The root of the word *garn* is Old Norse for "intestines" and "fishing net." *Sarn*, however, means "stepping stone."
[397] The view of lefthandedness as evil or degenerate comes from superstition and bad science. Moore's reference to the "Left-handed god" in "The Pandora Effect," however, is based on the "Left-handed path," which came into vogue with Theosophy founder Helena Blavatsky and occultist Aleister Crowley, and was defined by Church of Satan founder, Anton LaVey, who wrote: "Satanism is not a white light religion; it is a religion of the flesh, the mundane, the carnal—all of which are ruled by Satan, the personification of the Left-Hand Path."

Chapter 57: Breaking of the Battalions

[398] Jaggar Antarath is a Tuckerism of top-tier contributor Anthony Marchese.
[399] General Itenn Strom is a Tuckerism of top-tier contributor Simon Trent.
[400] Major Nykh Ekwurn is a Tuckerism of top-tier contributor Henry Kwun.
[401] Not the same as Shenbit Bonecrushers, the Dandrian Bonecrushers come from *Challenge #49.*
[402] Farleks first appeared in *Operation: Elrood*; Akorec first appeared in *Lando Calrissian and the Mindharp of Sharu*; Armadid come from *Coruscant and the Core Worlds*.

Chapter 58: Horliss-Horliss Throws a Shape

[403] The etymologies of Nakat and Magataran are sound. They first appeared in *Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter*. The idea of the Kessel system being engineered by the Celestials comes from *The Unknown Regions*, and Celestial technology is suspected in *Fate of the Jedi: Outcast*. Kessel had been called Xo's Eye in the time of Xim's Empire, which itself could be a reference to Xoth/Zoth, a world connected to Typhojem. The Assemblers are large archanids who first appeared in *The Bounty Hunter Wars: Book 1: Mandalorian Armor*. Korriban's etymology is interesting. *Ban*, of course, can mean "bane" or "bone" in Middle and Old English, while the Albanian origin of *korr* means to reap or harvest, and the Hungarian *kori* means belonging to an era.
[404] "And perhaps that would have amused him" is a line from Richard Adams' novel *Watership Down,* referencing General Woundwort. Kopa Khan comes from "Light the Sky on Fire," the song performed by Jefferson Starship in the Star Wars Holiday Special, and was referenced as a corruption of Cold Danda Sine's name in *Cult Encounters*
[405] The Perann Nebula which surrounds the twelve stellar clusters of the Nihil Retreat, first referenced in *Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor*, is merged with the Red Nebula from *Star Wars 50: The Crimson Forever*. Both are scarlet-hued, located in the the Nihil Retreat and described as a stellar cluster (which suggests an extra-galactic location). The separation of the

Red Nebula from the main galaxy made sense in the context of the Celestials sealing away threats. This merger and cosmic expulsion also reconciles a contradiction raised by the *Force and Destiny Core Rulebook* which placed Rhand in the Dreighton Nebula in the Outer Rim.

[406] Hssiss first appeared in *Tales of the Jedi: The Saga of Nomi Sunrider*, though they were retconned to have appeared in *Splinter of the Mind's Eye*.

[407] The EU reconciled the Kaiburr Crystal, from *Splinter of the Mind's Eye,* with the kyber crystals, e.g., those seen in the *Clone Wars* episodes "A Test of Strength," "The Gathering," and "In Search of the Crystal." In other words, adegan crystals and other lightsaber crystals are types of kyber crystals, as is the Kaiburr Crystal itself, from which the name *kyber* was taken.

[408] Kanduh first appeared in "Trois mini scénarios: Le Trésor oublié" ("The Forgotten Treasure"), in *Casus Belli #66*; the Ghest in *Creatures of the Galaxy*; Rhen Varite in *Tales of the Jedi: Redemption*; Sarafurians in *Star Wars Gamer* #9; the Sixela were an unidentified extinct race in *Rebel Force: Uprising*; the Cilpar is the name given here for an extinct species first mentioned in *X-Wing Rogue Squadron: The Rebel Opposition*. P'Chek are from *Goroth: Slave of the Empire*. Eandrills come from "Face a L'etoile Mourante" ("Facing the Dying Star") in *Clerc Obscur* #2 (1996).

Chapter 59: Seven Seals

[409] A few things going on here, including a reference to *Twice Upon a Time*.

[410] *Vitae*, which means life, is based on the Latin opposite of *Mortis*, which means death.

[411] That the western quadrant of the galaxy, comprising much of the Unknown Regions, has tangled hyperlanes due to the Celestials' desire to contain dangerous enemies, was first explored in the *Unknown Regions*, *The Essential Guide to Warfare,* and *The Essential Guide to Warfare Author's Cut.* The Shadow Worlds, taken from Kreia's dialogue referring to the True Sith and "all their shadowed worlds," in *Knights of the Old Republic II*, are proximous to the Dark Worlds.

[412] The term "True Sith" was first introduced in *Knights of the Old Republic* in reference to the Sith species, distinguishing them from other Sith Orders. In *Knights of the Old Republic II*, it's revealed that a mysterious apocalyptic Empire of True Sith is hidden in the Unknown Regions, seeking the destruction of all life. Lead writer Chris Avellone said that the True Sith were intended to be "the ancient Sith (like the ancient, ancient ones… some of them just never went away, they just… lingered). I wanted them to feel like the Shadows in Babylon 5." He added, "These guys would just be monsters… they're the ancients, so they're not just ruling a solar system, [but] swathes of the galaxy." Kreia's dialogue regarding the power of the ancient Sith Lords making present-day Force-users seem like "children playing with toys" was revealed by Avellone to be setting up the scope of the True Sith threat for the cancelled *Knights of the Old Republic III*. He furthermore said *Knights of the Old Republic III* "would be set in Unknown Regions in the territory of the True Sith. True Sith were meant to appear incomprehensibly vicious and menacing… True Sith were not merely a sect of Sith but were actually the original Sith Lords," and that, "Much like the Shadows in Babylon 5, they were orchestrating the collapse of the Republic from behind the scenes, interfering with key events to cause echoes through the Force and leave it ripe for invasion–hopefully without a shot even being fired. In essence, they were changing the shape of the galaxy through manipulation of specific people and conflicts, much like Sidious did, but on an even larger scale than Episode 1 through 3." Avellone said the "outskirts of the real Sith Empire" were meant to be "very, very deep into the Unknown Regions," and "a pretty terrifying place." Of its size, he said "ultimately there was just a lot more game area in Kotor 3, just because the Sith Empire was just so [expletive] big." According to GameRant.com, Avellone described "an ancient and deadly incarnation of the Sith Empire awaiting players on the very fringes of space. Not unlike *Mass Effect's* race of Reapers, these malicious Sith would destroy everything in their wake, bringing with them hordes of subservient slave creatures to do their bidding."

[413] The *Essential Atlas* indicated that the Killiks were exploited by the Celestials, but that can be chalked up to historian error. The Cosmic Turbines were first mentioned in *The New Essential*

Chronology. The Ciratu Spheres, the Quintarad, the Diatian Clockwork, and the Ianane Ring first appeared in *The Essential Guide to Warfare: Author's Cut* — "The Celestials;" the Still Curtain first appeared in *Fate of the Jedi: Apocalypse*. In all of these cases the Celestials (or the Killiks working on their behalf) are credited as being their creators.

[414] There are various contradictory claims regarding the size of the Unknown Regions relative to known space. Here, the retcon used in *The Essential Atlas* is referenced, with the larger figure referring to the hundreds of stellar clusters (including the Nihil Retreat), dense nebulae, and seven satellite galaxies orbiting the Skyriver galaxy as well as the galactic halo, and the smaller figure (15% of known space) referring to a percentage of the main galaxy's disc.

[415] The World Puller/Centerpoint Station/Qolaraloq first appeared in *Ambush at Corellia*.

[416] Roon and the Rainbow Comet first appeared in *Droids:* "Tale of the Roon Comets." It is surrounded by a veiling nebulosity called the Cloak of the Sith, which is explained here.

Chapter 60: Hail, Sons of Hender!

[417] This material is from Robert J. Sawyer's cancelled novel, *Alien Exodus*, which was going to establish the origins of Humans as having come from Earth to the Star Wars galaxy and would have included tie-ins to all of Lucas' films, including *American Graffiti, THX-1138*, and *Willow*. Although it was uncompleted in 1995, the author made the outline and the complete first 11,000 words he wrote available at his site here: https://www.sfwriter.com/alienout.htm. Although certain details are changed (e.g., the time-travel scenario from the flashback portion has been retconned), I consider the story and its cast of characters as having happened pretty much as told. Sawyer was inspired by the book *Monsters and Aliens from George Lucas*, by Bob Carrau, which I also consider to be in-continuity. I initially had this story occurring earlier, but with a better understanding of the timeframe of *THX-1138* in relation to the climax of the War of Temporal Planes, I moved it to its appropriate place and eliminated the participation of the Architects, which I think works better. As to its date, despite claims that it's set in the 25th Century, there's nothing in the film or promotional material to indicate this. The confusion seems to stem from a misunderstanding of Lucas' quote in which he said: "THX really is Buck Rogers in the twentieth century, rather than Buck Rogers in the future." The short predecessor, *THX-1138 4EB* has an internal date of 2187, and that is the date I went by. As Dale Hender was to be designated THX-0001, that places the events of his story some time earlier. The Sons of Freedom is a term that has come to include several groups, the most famous being the Freedom's Sons (or Sons and Daughters of Freedom) led by Captain Zozridor Slayke, a rogue member of the Judicial Forces who, in the face of the Republic's refusal to act, gathered an army to fight a private war against the Separatists. They were first mentioned in *Han Solo at Star's End* and appeared in *Jedi Trial*.

[418] Little to nothing was known of the insectoid Vulagool race (who were first mentioned in the *The Old Republic*), save that they had an unknown tie to the Killiks, who they hated and feared. This gave me the idea to make them one of their offspring races and tie them to the ancient insectoids of the Varlian Empire of Sawyer's *Alien Exodus*. The title of this subsection is also a tribute to Sawyer's novel, *The Calculating God*.

[419] That Hutts came from the stunted larvae of Varlians is from *Alien Exodus*. While the Hutts are well-known, their siblings mainly come from the EU: the Yahk-Tosh from *Star Wars #27*: "Starcrash;" the Quockran from *Galaxy Guide 6: Tramp Freighters,* first illustrated by Ralph McQuarrie in *The Art of Star Wars Episode VI* as concept art for Jabba; the Ytha from *Monsters and Aliens from George Lucas*; Orooturoo from *Jabba the Hutt: The Hunger of Princess Nampi*; the t'landa Til from *The Paradise Snare*. Sy Myrthians from *The Phantom Menace*.

[420] From "The Malicrux Sector," by Jez Gordon (*Wild Space Magazine #1*, Daniel Stull 2014).

[421] This quote is taken directly from the voiceover in Brian Moriarity's LucasArts game, *Loom*.

[422] Taken from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (HarperCollins, 1981). The original reads: "Well, the first War of the Machines seems to be drawing to its final inconclusive chapter — leaving, alas, everyone the poorer, many bereaved or maimed and millions dead, and only one thing triumphant: the Machines. As the servants of the Machine are becoming a privileged class, the Machines are going to be enormously more powerful."

Chapter 61: The Twilight Wars

[423] The earliest instance of the Jedi Code comes from the West End Games book, *The Roleplaying Game*, which was later attributed to Master Odan-Urr in the *Power of the Jedi Sourcebook*. Several iterations followed. *The Jedi Path* provided a mantra from the Manderon period that clarified what was meant by the later ones. Instead of "There is no emotion, there is peace," it reads "Emotion, yet peace," reiterating that concept for the other four. Thus, the chronologically older version accepts the existence of these negative states of mind, but puts forward the Jedi's response to them. Even though the more commonly known versions are identifying an idealized state of mind, they're also much more open to misinterpretation and being seen as unrealistic platitudes. The version here is built on the one from the Manderon period.

[424] The concept of the Gree meeting with the Rakata comes from *The Essential Atlas*. The rest is new. Whuffa Worms first appeared in *The Courtship of Princess Leia*; Greelors in *Ultimate Adversaries*. Pendalanorians come from *Casus Belli* #107, 1997.

[425] The Viis Empire comes from *Lucasfilm's Alien Chronicles*, a three-book series by Deborah Chester comprising *The Golden One*, *The Crimson Claw*, and *The Crystal Eye*. It replaced Robert J. Sawyer's *Alien Exodus* after the latter was inexplicably cancelled. Ostensibly unintended for the *Star Wars* universe, with the publication of *The Complete Star Wars Encyclopedia*, which included entries for the Aaroun and Viis Empire (the main protagonist and antagonists from *Alien Chronicles),* and *The Unknown Regions* mention of the Viis Empire's destruction by Mnggal-Mnggal, the trilogy was canonized. Inexplicably, Wookieepedia editors voted to keep it out.

Book VI: The Third Shadow

[426] "This Section Accessed and Read Earlier" encompasses the flashback portion that Hari Seldona read in Chapter 8: The Testimony of Cindel Towani.

[427] High Priestess Voodenne Idellist comes from topmost contributor, Ellie Venti Dodson.

[428] Gethul first appeared in *The Old Republic: Knights of the Eternal Throne*.

[429] Ukusorrosuku, or Daritha Soros, is a name original to this work, and used to give an identity to the previously unnamed and inexplicable Killik Sith Lord who ruled Alsakan, circa 30,000 BBY, from "Race for the Tessent," in *Star Wars Gamer 9*. It also provides a namesake for the Soros and Ukunuku nests from *The Old Republic*.

[430] The collapsing sun on Jatee comes from "The Evacuation of Jatee," in *Supernova*.

[431] Golg derives from the Hebrew *gulgoleth* for "Place of the Skull." Mhu'anThul's skull and ornamental monuments being brought here ties to the reference in *Book of Sith* that the Valley of Golg contains monuments that date back to a time before the Zhell marched across Coruscant, while retaining the origin of Korriban as being formed from Typhojem's skull.

Chapter 62: Hibernal Tales from the Endor Moon

[432] I can write Ewok stories till the nerfs come home. Stagorr comes from *Ewoks* #6: "The Ice Demon;" Boreacubra is a Tuckerism of Bob Carrau, who wrote the *Ewoks* episode, "The Season Scepter," but it also has linguistic import in "boreas" (a cold northerly wind) and "cubro" (to protect or cover), a fitting name for the Snow King. The *Ikil* is Old Norse for ice.

[433] Tamil Skwint is a Tuckerism of friend and contributor Matt Wilkins. Check out his Star Wars Expanded Universe Youtube channel, https://www.youtube.com/c/kidcardco, where he goes through the entire EU in chronological order as best he knows how.

Chapter 63: Stratagems of the Spider

[434] The Nests of Soros, Ruur, Kitinitik, and Ukunuku are from *The Old Republic*. The Dark Nest in the *Dark Nest Trilogy* was led by the Dark Queen and Night Herald, as were the Ruur, Kitinitk and Ukunuku. Soros is renowned as the monstrous Black Hive. The Killik incursion to Korriban circa 30,000 BBY is from *The Essential Atlas.*

[435] The idea here was to show an alphabetic cross-section of races and what they went through, hinting that other entries were perhaps incomplete or simply not read aloud, but which may get an expansion later on. Akir owes a debt to Roger Corman's *Battle Beyond the Stars* (1980).

[436] The Aythrin come from "The Cometeers," by Jack Williamson (*Astounding Stories*, 1936).

[437] Thanks to the article "Endless Fun," by Michael Graziano, published by aeon.co, for helping me understand the technical aspects of mind uploading, as well as the darker consequences of a virtual heaven: https://aeon.co/essays/the-virtual-afterlife-will-transform-humanity

[438] The Sephi King Cavanees is my friend David Canavese, who did the incredible maps for the 3d ed.

[439] Sodon Volentis is a Tuckerization of topmost contributor Ellie Venti Dodson.

Chapter 64: Warriors of Shadow

[440] The Warriors of Shadow are a fascinating but little-developed group first mentioned in *The Unknown Regions* but not named until the mission "Battle of Terror" in *The Old Republic.* Their split into malevolent and benevolent groups, Jirell and the establishment of Taarak are new to SE, but derives from a host of sources. Jirell is, of course, inspired by the C.L. Moore heroine. The seduction of the Tsaung and the temptation to make a new home with a friendly people was probably unconsciously inspired by Richard Adams' *Watership Down*. The geography of Roon and its creatures come from the *Droids* animated series, specifically episodes 10-13.

[441] A line taken from my of my favorite films growing up, *Heavy Metal* (1981), which is from the magazine of the same name which influenced George Lucas. Taraakians, however, (or Taarakians) are older than *Heavy Metal* and can be traced back to none other than Leigh Brackett who had a warrior tribe of them on Mars in "The Last Days of Shandakor" (*Startling Stories*, 1952). Her version has been combined with the former version to provide a potential back-story for them. The quote that follows this one is borrowed and slightly changed from the song "Defender" by Manowar (*Fighting the World*, 1987).

[442] Annat'hael the D'mi'go King is a Tuckerization of my friend David Beck, who worked on the Twelve Realms graph. Cosh the Lepi is also a name I got from David.

Chapter 65: Farewell to the Gods of Illathurion

[443] Adder Hive the Jinn is a Tuckerism of my friend and contributor Eddie van der Heijden.

[444] As much as I love the EU, there are times when the editors didn't do as much research as they could have, such as in the numerous races that look nearly identical but aren't established to be the same. Hence why I had the crocodile-like Gharial establishing colonies on Drackmar (*The Courtship of Princess Leia*), Druulgotha *(Jedi Dawn*), Gormdin (*Wanted by Cracken*), Hoszh Iszhir ("Bring Me the Children"), and Nahsu Minor (*Geonosis and the Outer Rim Worlds*) to establish that at least *some* of these similar-looking lizard-like races come from a single origin.

Chapter 66: The Ardor of Outland Suns

[445] The Tho Yor first appeared in *Dawn of the Jedi: Force Storm*.

[446] The Wellspring of Balance, the Font of Power, and the Pool of Knowledge first appeared in *Fate of the Jedi: Abyss*, though that series had a Throne of Balance in the realm Beyond Shadows. I consider the Throne to be a Force remnant of the Wellspring of Balance, which in the series is the geyser that the Thuruht Killik hive recalls the Ones emerging from. This seems to indicate that the Wellspring of Balance brings forth water from the Wellspring of Life, which is

the world of the Midichlorians. The original purpose of the Fountain of Power and Pool of Knowledge was never revealed, and yet Father warned his children to avoid them. The setting was later known as "Abeloth's Planet," which is here called Vitae.

[447] Belot—who becomes Abeloth—does not start out evil, and I don't personally believe she's deceiving them (though readers are free to have other interpretations), even if she holds within her psyche a kind of Pandora's Box, which Elegast inadvertently opens.

[448] Abeloth is a fascinating name. The Hebrew *Abel* (הֶבֶל) means "vanity," which is a nice bit of synchronicity, given "vain Tilotny," and this is doubly interesting given that the word "lot" is at the root of both names. The English *Lot* means "destiny" and "fate, while in Hebrew (לוט) means "veil." *Bellus* (or belo/bela) means "beautiful." So Belot "beautiful destiny" later turned into Abeloth ("vain fate.") Going even deeper, *Bel* is the Aramaic form of Baal, the evil fertility god of the Canaanites, and means "Lord," with *Baalah* as "Lady." Hence, Belot, the Lady of Destiny. In Abeloth, the "-oth" suffix usually signifies plurality, while the "a-" prefix can mean "without," giving the name Abeloth the alternate meaning of "Without Lords," which is an interesting allusion to her disdain of the Ones. Here's another: the Old English *loth* is the origin of the word "loathe" and refers to something hateful and evil. The Norse meaning of *abe* is "fool" and also refers to a mimic or copycat. Abeloth and Tilotny can shapeshift, and Tilotny was accused of being a copycat by her brothers. Abeloth can, thus, mean an evil, foolish mimic. *Abe* has additional roots worth mentioning. The first is a Sardinian reference to a "bee" (which connects to Mnggal-Mnggal's poem), though I also like the Scots definition of wanting to be "let alone" or "left undisturbed," which was true for Tilotny at the end.

Chapter 67: The Anguish of the Chosen

[449] A crucial idea presented in the *Chronicles of the Shadow War* trilogy is the existence of an alternate *Willow* universe in which an alternate Elora Danan went dark. This is intriguing on a few levels, not least of which is the idea of an alternate Luke (as depicted in Disney's sequel trilogy) existing in an alternate dimension. That Lucas himself crafted the foundation and basic ideas for this lends credence to the idea of the Star Wars universe having alternate dimensions, a place where Elora Danan and Luke Skywalker might have taken a different path. This is ultimately behind the "One Canon, Three Universes" ideology first espoused on starwarstimeline.net.

[450] The three companions were named after my cousins William, Sheila, and Lisie Villanueva.

[451] Durace and Veroleem come from *The Unknown Regions*. The temple and statue of Korman Lao, and the Kanzer Exiles, come from *Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor*.

[452] The Maungur and their connection to the Rishii come from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal* #4. The Rishii were first referenced in *Dark Force Rising*. Ereesus was mentioned first in *Tales of the Jedi Companion*. The unidentified Ereesi come from *The Essential Atlas*.

[453] Imperator Eldon Isolde comes from topmost contributor, Ellie Venti Dodson

[454] The subtitle is taken from American novelist John Dos Passos, "War is utter damn nonsense, a vast cancer fed by lies and self seeking malignity on the part of those who don't do the fighting."

Chapter 68: Belot, Bringer of Chaos

[455] King Eber, the Smiter King is a Tuckerization of top-tier contributor Michael Steinberg.

[456] Roorat Yhorn is a Tuckerization of my friend and editor Harry Thornton.

[457] Rex Beh'Anihlus is a Tuckerization of top-tier contributor Shea Hublin.

[458] Premont and the Turagranians come from the book, *Han Solo: Nomad*, by Ed Fisher, Valhalla Paholy, 1992 (*Han Solo Nomadjai* as originally published in Hungarian.) The author had made Gundarks the ancient enemy race that scared them off, unaware that Gundarks aren't sapient. The Balmorden were a compromise to that concept, while the Rakata made the most sense as the larger threat.

[459] The history of the Sandpeople and Jawas is interesting. The ultra-rare *Dig* magazine of July 1999 had a story by David West Reynolds called "The Lost City of Tatooine," in which Luke discovers the titular ruins and the fact that the Sandpeople were once known as Ghorfas and dwelt

in that city. *The Galactic Phrase Book & Travel Guide* established that the Ghorfas and Jawas—prior to the time that Tatooine was a desert—were once known as the Kumumgah. *KOTOR* postulated that the Kumumgah might be related to Humans. This section ties up these loose ends and shows how that all came about. While womp rats probably come from George's typical method of nomenclature—"swamp rats," minus the "s," and changing the "a" to "o," there are some linguistic links that helped shaped this section. I also liked how the word "womp womp" means a kind of deep, thrumming sound—which put me in mind of their secret language.

[460] Paul S. Kemp's *Riptide* featured the Mother Station and the Seer clone of Lumiya. *The Old Republic* featured The Mother Machine.

Chapter 69: Dark Kingdoms Divided

[461] Though first mentioned in LucasArts' *Rebellion*, Tython didn't appear until *Darth Bane: Rule of Two*; Caamas first appeared in *Specter of the Past*; Ossus comes from *Dark Empire's* endnotes.

[462] The Force Priests of Grenzer are from "Pour une autre guerre," *Chroniques d'Outre Monde* #11.

[463] From the Leigh Brackett draft of *TESB*, with a slight emendation on my part.

[464] Soa and his Infernal Council come from *The Old Republic.* The Ziost Abyss contains inscriptions referencing him. A giant Rakata known as the Infernal One, Soa and his Infernal Council conquered a thousand worlds, having surpassed and strove in opposition to the Infinite Empire (who had only conquered five hundred). The Infinite Empire finally defeated and imprisoned him.

[465] Sakkra-Kla and Nakgru are from *Book of Sith,* which dates them prior to 17,000 BBY.

[466] While King Adas first appeared in *Tales of the Jedi Companion*, it would be *Evil Never Dies: The Sith Dynasties* that detailed his history and established him as the Sith'ari.

[467] Yshaar Kael first appeared in *The Old Republic*, identified as the "Betrayer of Adas."

[468] The intent here was to finally confirm the origin of the Sith title of Darth, which has been implied in multiple sources to derive from either the Rakatan phrase *darr tah* ("victory over death," "immortal") or title *Daritha* ("Emperor," "Ruler of Worlds"). Here, it's revealed that it's derived from *both*, suggesting *darr tah* and *Daritha* have a common etymological root, which worked well with the title of one of the earliest known Darths, Andeddu the "Immortal God-King," with the "Immortal Gods of the Sith," and the "Immortal Emperor" Valkorion, who is confirmed as a Darth in *The Old Republic Encyclopedia*. Making *Dathka* the ancient Sith translation of the title fit too with Dathka Graush. I left it ambiguous as to whether all those bearing the earlier title Daritha are Darths; certainly Vitus and Nemo Dak are called Darth retroactively, but drawing comparison to the ancient Roman title of *Imperator*, whence we derive Emperor via the French *Empereur*, we find that most historians call Augustus the first Roman Emperor, yet still others identify Julius Caesar as such even though his powers were derived from the office of Dictator (though he was also acclaimed an *Imperator* twice), and meanwhile no one at all calls *Imperatores* before these two men "Emperors," since prior to Augustus it simply connoted an honorific that could be given multiple times to a triumphant general.

[469] It included Kyyrah, the Jewel of Xo who ruled the Zanibar; Doruk the Uncaged, sprung from the dungeons of Raspir; Alarii and Keryha, the Sisters of Sorrow; Cyrisop the Exiled, a warrior recalled from distant lands; Jael the Silencer, Soa's most lethal assassin; Fahren Jaj, the Laughing Lord and Adas' court jester, whose madness was wrought by visions of the Nine Hells; Serrod the Messenger, who promulgated the faith of the old gods; Kahesh the Reborn, from the catacombs of Kessel; Wei'val the Elder and his son, Wei'val the Lesser; Yshaar Kael, the Betrayer of Adas; Luthro the Kinslayer, who beheaded his brother, Wyrmuk the Undying, in punishment for his defiance; Jekhop, R'hoteb and Za'heen Kaur, the Bowed Lords, so-named for their sycophantic devotion to the Infernal One.

[470] Revealed in *The Old Republic,* a pre-Republic Sith pureblood called Kyyrah is described as having been the "Jewel of Xo"—another historical anomaly pointing to the wide spread of the Sith species in this primeval era. All of these names refer to Sith purebloods dating back to Adas' era introduced in *The Old Republic*, who are called Soa's Infernal Council. Wyrmuk the Undying

comes from *Book of Sith*; his headless corpse and epithet *the Undying* suggested that he might have survived beheading, the implication being that Lord Simus later used the same technique.

[471] The Agasami of Kuoka are from the Spanish RPG magazine, *Troll* #17, from the adventure "La Caida del Imperio Agasami," where they're presented as a race of space felines whose entire civilisation—from their politics and culture to their homeworld's geography and climate to their very diet—is just straight up lifted from feudal Japan.

[472] The name Jaure Tche is taken from an ancient Sith book in *Legacy 27: Into the Core*. The twin pyramids refer to the two pyramids the dark side god-king with an east Asian appearance is standing on in *Tales of the Jedi* #5: "The Saga of Nomi Sunrider," from the caption that reads the "magicians who made themselves into kings—and gods—using the power of the dark side" in a "time before recorded history." The fall to his death refers to his apparent death in the background panel. Jar'Kai refers to the Yovshin Swordsmen, the elite Atrisian warriors who created the combat form of wielding two blades, Jar'Kai, and the city on Atrisia that they named it after. Having the twin pyramids in the city of Jar'Kai made sense, keeping with the "two" theme. Kitel Phard is another name for Atrisia. The Kashi Mer connection is due to the fact that the Kashi Mer developed their own form of dual-wielding swords—Niman—and Niman and Jar'Kai merged to create the sixth lightsaber form after being adopted by the Jedi, lore developed by Abel G. Peña in the *Dark Forces Saga* series. Last but not least, according to Wookieepedia, "It was rumored that Atrisia was home to many mythological creatures and demigods. One such demigod known galaxywide was Wapoe, the Atrisian demigod of disguise." The Kiosutokyra was just a rearrangement of the Japanese *Kirisuto-kyo*.

[473] The Forcesaber, introduced in the *Dawn of the Jedi* comics as a Rakatan progenitor to the lightsaber, is referenced here to not only explain Adas' appearance holding an anachronistic lightsaber-like weapon in *Tales of the Jedi #5:* "The Saga of Nomi Sunrider," but also what look like red lightsabers wielded by the Infernal Council upon their awakening in *The Old Republic*.

[474] The previously unnamed Sith spellbook spirit on Onderon, introduced in *Tales of the Jedi Companion*, is implied to belong to Adas in the short story, "Hammer" from *Star Wars Insider #147*, a connection confirmed on Edward M. Erdelac's blog. This cements that connection. Shadow Hand, the formal Sith title for one's apprentice, had not been given an ancient Sith root, like other Sith titles, until now. Bilious Torment is an ancient Sith ruler from *Book of Sith*.

[475] The Rakata coming to Mortigan was mentioned in *The Old Republic* MMORPG.

[476] Psetthur Rail is a Tuckerism of the experimental filmmaker Arthur Lipsett, whose film *21-87* inspired Lucas to make his early short films *Look at Life* (1965), *Freiheit* (1966), and of course *THX-1138 4EB* and the feature length THX-1138.

[477] The connection between Mnggal-Mnggal and the Sickness from *Death Troopers* and *Red Harvest* is made in *The Unknown Regions* and confirmed here on the basis of the Sickness' depiction in *Red Harvest*, in which it's portrayed as a hungering and sapient entity of the Dark Side. This retcons the Murakami orchid as an ingredient in an alchemical summoning ritual. *Red Harvest* revealed the sentient Murakami orchid retained a separate intelligence from that of the virus, resisting the Sickness' domination and helping Jedi Hestizo Trace escape it. Mlok and the Mloki come from the 1933 Clark Ashton Smith story, "A Star Change" (aka. "The Visitors from Mlok"). The Mloki's connection to the Mluki (from *Children of the Jedi*) seemed obvious.

[478] The Qadel, Ermi, Izi, Veeza, and Zoa'mon (and their conflict with Xim the Despot) come from Michael Kogge's "The Despotica" epic. I spoke to Michael about the unnamed races before creating them. The Agorffi come from *Galaxy Guide 9: Fragments from the Rim*; the Myill come from the *Star Wars Adventure Journal #8* story "Firepower;" the Malagarrian come from *Star Wars Missions #20: Total Destruction*; the Malabar Construct first appeared in *The Essential Atlas*. Their descriptions and/or associations are new here. Quad-Lo and Bazarre are from Marvel's *Star Wars #59*.

Chapter 70: Xendor & the First Great Schism

[479] The Sorcerers of Tund were speculated to be either True Sith themselves or their "unorthodox vanguard," in cut content from *Knights of the Old Republic Campaign Guide*.

[480] The influence of the Way of the Dark on Xendor is from *The Essential Guide to Warfare*.

[481] Gann Gosam the Xi'Dec comes from *Wish 13* author, Samantha H.G, which is one of the earliest "Expanded Encounters" books, and a great one at that.

[482] This latter line of the Grand Master Fardreamer, who comes from contributor Stefan Pfister, was taken from Clark Ashton Smith's quote: "Because science has lit a few artificial lights amid the darkness of things, modern man tends to forget that the darkness still exists." *The Black Book of Clark Ashton Smith* (Arkham House).

[483] Confirming that the Dark Underlord from the New Sith Wars is indeed the spirit of Xendor summoned from Chaos, hinted at in *Evil Never Dies: The Sith Dynasties*. This is faithful to the original conception of Xendor being a Sith Lord and the First Great Schism birthing the Sith Order (before the Second Great Schism was later retconned as the origin point), as well as the Legions of Lettow being an alternative name for the Black Knights of Sith in Lucas' early Star Wars drafts (who, in turn, inspired the Black Knights of Malrev IV). The link to the Black Legions of XoXaan from the Second Great Schism, in turn, was not only a linguistic tie but based on the fact the Black Knights rose again after the New Sith Wars in the Fluwhaka revolt (the Trap of Fluwhaka was a battle fought in the Hundred-Year Darkness, suggesting a historical connection). Overall, this better connects Xendor and the Legions to later Sith history and make them less of an outlier. Due to the fact that Xendor *later* became a Sith Lord and due to the connections between his legacy and the Second Great Schism, it indeed could be said—as was commonly thought by fans at one point—that Xendor *was* the first Jedi-turned-Sith Lord and that the First Great Schism indeed brought about the Sith Order, after all.

[484] The *Child of Light* trilogy of role-playing scenarios introduces both the Soulsaber's background and the Tascollan Nebula, vaguely dating matters twenty millennia before the Original Trilogy era. The only known large-scale conflict between Jedi and Dark Jedi that occurs more than 20,000 BBY is here, adding a further string to the conflict.

[485] Kelammar comes from contributor Mark Elam.

Chapter 71: Dwellers of the Deep

[486] The Aiwhas named Mawmett and Thish are Tuckerizations of my friend and Hungarian Han Solo translator, Matthew Smith.

[487] Melkorr and Protas' tale was first told in "The Tale of the Aiwha Pod," by Ryan Kaufman, in *Republic Commando: Prima Official Game Guide*. I wanted to recontextualize that story with the framework of the Cosmic Wars and with the knowledge of the Aiwhas being a sapient race.

[488] Michele Vos comes from top-tier contributor, Neill Armstrong.

[489] Sgt. Davon Halidom comes from top-tier contributor, David Long.

[490] Evlyne Vandor comes from top-tier contributor, Michael Bjorvand.

[491] Canned fruit appeared in *Red Harvest*.

[492] While the Progenitor and destruction of Hrakert Station come from *KOTOR*, everything else here is new. The idea derived from the imagery of Hrakert Station being threatened by a giant megalodon, interspersed with the documented cases of people receiving premonitions prior to a disaster. See *The Supernatural Worldview: Examining Paranormal, Psi, and the Apocalyptic*, by Cris Putnam and Angie Peters; Defense Publishing.

Chapter 72: Suzal and the Sorcerers of Rhand

[493] Suzal and the Five come from "The Pandora Effect" (*The Empire Strikes Back Monthly #151)*.

[494] The Dark Worlds, including Rennek, are referenced in Abel G. Peña's *SkyeWalkers: A Clone Wars Story* and are said to neighbor the Shadow Worlds wherein lie the Sorcerers of Rhand. There are twelve stellar clusters in the Perann Nebula, six and six.

[495] Bishop Mandible is from *Loom* (Lucasfilm Games).

[496] The sapience of Sarlaccs is a tribute to Daniel Keys Moran, who intended that for Boba Fett's encounter with the Sarlacc on Tatooine. See his interview where he speaks of that here: https://www.bobafettfanclub.com/news/fettpedia/daniel-keys-moran_jaster-mereel/

[497] The Yevethan Hegemony come from *The Black Fleet Crisis* trilogy.

[498] Yuwlarr Roth is a tuckerism of my friend and contributor Arthur Lowery.

Chapter 73: Kingdoms of Nightmare

[499] Yun-Harla revealed herself as one of the Immortal Gods of the Sith in the as-yet unpublished *Vader's Legacy* by Abel Peña, with the holocron of Adas approving the worship of her and the other Sith Gods. This naturally lent itself to her twin, Yun-Yammka, being retconned as a Sith God as well; interestingly, Yun-Yammka is described as not being a native deity of the Yuuzhan Vong, but rather one they adopt when they turn warlike. Svelt Aller came to worship Yun-Harla, while Darth Vua (one of the Slayers) worshipped Yun-Yammka.

[500] On page 5 and the last page of Marvel *Star Wars* #38 appear Arabic letters for J and S. This was in tribute to Jim Shooter, editor-in-chief of Marvel's *Star Wars* and the man responsible for them getting the license back in 1976, which saved Marvel and kickstarted the Star Wars Expanded Universe. I Tuckerized J.S. as Jihem Stoor. Editor Danny Fingeroth and Terry Austin are hidden here as well.

[501] While the retcon of the droid planet and its god, Ronyards, from "Rust Never Sleeps" as an Abominor was suggested in the form of in-universe researchers' theories in *The Droids Re-Animated*, that went against Alan Moore's intent. So, here Ronyards is identified as something beyond the Silentium.

[502] The Chazrach first appeared in *The New Jedi Order: Dark Tide I: Onslaught*.

[503] I understand and sympathize with those who prefer the letter of the law approach to the Yuuzhan Vong as having come from another galaxy. For the following reasons, I've always found that implausible, not just because of the insurmountable travel times for even faster-than-light speed (for which reason the Nagai, Tofs and Ssi-ruuk were later retconned as having come from within the local galactic cluster), but due to: 1. Biology: C-3PO and Danni Quee note that the Vong have Human DNA, indicating that they're a near-Human race who'd bred with other races. 2. Language: In *Vector Prime,* their language is said to be a variation of Janguine, which is in the Skyriver galaxy. 3. Neighbors: the Silentium and Abominor races which the Yuuzhan Vong battled in their native stars are known to have originated in Skyriver before coming to the "Yuuzhan Vong galaxy," and return to the Unknown Regions around the same time as Yuuzhan Vong scouts were appearing in the Unknown Regions. 4. Hyperspace Barrier: There literally is no "neighboring" galaxy (apart from the dwarf galaxies), as Skyriver exists within its own dimension. This was established in *The Essential Guide to Warfare: Author's Cut*, when historian Insmot Bowen said the Celestials "engineered the hyperspace barrier that surrounds our galaxy" to protect themselves (or the galaxy) from invasion. Now it's true that they could have come from a neighboring dimension as the Human race did, but travel between dimensions is extremely rare. That said, had the other evidence not been present, this would have been the way to go. As regards the Vong's purported destruction of their home galaxy, as with the Charon, who also boasted of having destroyed all life in their realm, the idea of *all life in an entire galaxy* being destroyed seems highly suspect at best. Even within the parameters of a dwarf galaxy—which can have up to *20 million stars*—it's far more likely to be the bombastic and gross exaggeration of a militaristic and psychotic people. Of course, there's no doubt the Vong shed the blood of uncounted millions. That and the murder of their living world is enough, I think, for them to have been stripped of the Force.

Chapter 74: Undulations of the Two-Headed Beast

[504] Various anachronistic Sith references dating to the 15,000-14,000 BBY period are gathered into a unifying narrative. The "Sith-backed uprisings" come from *The Essential Guide to Vehicles and Vessels*, in which Republic Fleet Systems is said to be founded to create warships in response to

them "over fifteen millennia" prior to the movie era. The burial of the Sith library-temple on Krayiss II is dated to 14,000 BBY in the *Tales of the Jedi Companion* (West End Games, 1997); Dark Jedi leaving artifacts on Dromund Kaas are dated to circa 13,950 BBY by *The Old Republic: Revan* (Del Rey, 2012). The True Sith's retreats from strongholds on the fringes of the galaxy (such as Malachor V) into the Unknown Regions is consistent with Kreia's dialogue in *Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords*. The Republic believing the Sith to be pirates is to explain their almost-willful ignorance of the Sith species, as per *Book of Sith,* hearkens back to very early conceptions of the Sith as a people of pirate clans conquered by the first Dark Jedi and giving rise to the Sith Knights, originating from Lucas' early Star Wars drafts and carrying over into the early EU as a people (later a red-skinned species) of "Sith raiders" subjugated by wandering Dark Jedi.

[505] Vagaari first appeared in *Survivor's Quest,* and are here connected to little known pirates called Mugaari (from *Star Wars: TIE Fighter*).

[506] Zildrog and the Six Gods were first mentioned in *The Old Republic: Knights of the Fallen Empire* and appeared in *Knights of the Eternal Throne*.

[507] Ku'ar Danar originated in "Le facteur X" (*Casus Belli #115*, 1998). Coqui Tanar is the name of the Sith author of "From the Darkest Way of the Force," in *Legacy 27: Into the Core*, with the similarity to Ku'ar Danar too close to pass up given the character's adoption of false identities. The Norwegian *kuar* is the present tense verb of "subduing." *Danar* is Portugese and Venetian for "Hell" or "damnation," and the Swedish word for "shaping." Ku'ar Danar can thus mean "Subduing, Shaping" and also "Controlling Hell."

[508] The reference to crimson armor identifies Ku'ar Danar as the previously unnamed red-armored Sith Lord from *The Dark Side Sourcebook* and *Tales of the Jedi: The Golden Age of the Sith #0,* where he's identified as one of the earliest of his kind and shown worshipped by the Sith species.

Chapter 75: Eidolon of the Heresiarch Conspiracy

[509] Ku'ar Danar is explicitly identified as a "Dark Lord of the Sith" ("Seigneur Sombre des Sith") in "Le facteur X" (*Casus Belli*) and is described as having discovered the Sith people on Korriban *before* the events of the Second Great Schism. Similarly, Dathka Graush is identified as a pureblooded "Sith Dark Lord" in *Korriban: Planet of Lost Souls* (Wizards of the Coast), which is established as a synonym for "Dark Lord of the Sith" in *I, Jedi* (Bantam Spectra). In spite of the fact that Sith tombs were constructed during the ruler's lifetime, the dating of his Sith tomb to over 7,000 years BBY explicitly dates Dathka Graush to over a century before the arrival of Ajunta Pall. In addition, *Jedi vs Sith: The Essential Guide to the Force* refers to the Dark Jedi on Corbos as "the Dark Lords," suggesting this title was used by the Dark Jedi (likely sans the identifier "of the Sith") before their exile and conquest of the Sith people.

[510] Vitiate claiming the Sith'ari title retcons "Sith Emperor" as another Basic translation of that title (a title the Dark Jedi Exiles refuse to don in fear of the superstitious Sith). Another Sith title, Magnus, is given an origin for the first time in Abel G. Peña's *SkyeWalkers: A Clone Wars Story*, which describes it as a title "claimed by self-promoted rulers of the most ancient Sith. It means 'All-Powerful' or 'Lord of Lords'… In a word: Emperor." The High Galactic origin, aside from tying into Danar's Alsakani origins (High Galactic being Alsakan's mother tongue), was intended to cement the High Galactic language as the Star Wars equivalent to Latin. *Magnus* is directly taken from Latin. This archaic root of High Galactic was clearly known by at least some of the Dark Jedi, as evidenced by the inscription "In umbris potestas est" ("In the shadows, there is power") on Darth Andeddu's holocron, though it was likely used only for ceremonial purposes.

[511] Despite being far outside the Stygian Caldera, in Wild Space, the Naos Asteroid Belt is identified as home to the fortress of Dathka Graush in *TOR*. Although described as exceptionally rare in the galaxy, the red-skinned Lethan Twi'leks are common on Naos III, suggesting Sith Lethan Twi'leks such as Darth Talon may have descended from ancient Twi'lek-Sith on Naos.

[512] This early version of the Sith Code comes from cut content in the *Knights of the Old Republic Campaign Guide*; Abel Peña intended it to echo the earlier version of the Jedi Code from *Tales of*

the Jedi Companion. Ku'ar Danar's role as a teacher at Ossus explains why he was remembered as a Jedi, as well as Jedi historians' belief that he pulled the strings of the Hundred-Year Darkness despite not being directly involved himself, as per "Le facteur X" (*Casus Belli*).

[513] The Hundred-Year Darkness is called "the Black War" in "Le facteur X" (*Casus Belli*). Identifying it as the Thirteenth Alsakan Conflict is new and served to flesh-out both the Hundred-Year Darkness and the equally unexplored Alsakan Conflicts. The storming of Balmorra during this war comes from *TOR*. The Heresiarchs, a mysterious cult derived from Sith teachings, were first mentioned as a sect whose ideas Palpatine had studied in the *Dark Empire Sourcebook*. They're here identified as the Dark Jedi sect of the Second Great Schism, finally giving them a unique identifier. "Heresiarch" means "the founder of a heresy or the leader of a heretical sect."

[514] Described as an amoral scientific experimenter and theorist who taught the best Master Geneticists of his time in "Le facteur X" (*Casus Belli*), Ku'ar Danar was the perfect candidate to explain the anachronistic founding of the Sith Library of Veeshas Tuwan on the Colonies world of Arkania in 7,000 BBY, from *Tales of the Jedi Companion*, the Sith influences on the language and genes of the Arkanians (the greatest master geneticists of the era), the origins of Bataal Bandu, described as the descendents of early Sith-Dark Jedi cross-breeding experiments, from *InQuest Gamer #43*, and the Myke (with a linguistic and blood connection) in *The Written Word*.

[515] The unnamed Sith sorceress who destroyed Ambria was introduced in *Tales of the Jedi Companion,* with her ritual described as the greatest ritual of the Dark Side ever attempted up til that point. The "millennia" she lived prior to the events of *Tales of the Jedi Companion* date her to any time before 6,200 BBY, a curious historical anomaly given Ambria's location in the Inner Rim, far from the Sith Worlds. Here, she's finally given a name and story, though her depiction in the latter volume is said to be in error. Her "beasts of burden" are pets; her "enslaved" subjects are contented citizens. Her ritual to build a focal obelisk is intended *without* the use of her subjects. This provides a contrast to Danar's planet-killing monolith ritual.

[516] Ancient Sith had an apparent affinity for strange rituals involving moving celestial bodies with the Force. Aside from Ku'ar Danar's ritual that later moved Nilrebmah XIII into orbit around Nilrebmah XII, Mustafar was turned from a lush green world into a volcanic hell partly thanks to Sith moving one of the nearby gas giants with the Force during the Great Sith War, as per *The Essential Atlas*, and Valik Kodank attempted to move an asteroid in the Tascollan Nebula into the sun after the Great Hyperspace War, suffering a fate almost identical to that of Danar, as per *Child of Light* (Wizards of the Coast). Here and elsewhere, it is explained that these represent numinous Celestial seals that some Sith attempt to shatter so that "the stars are right" for the Immortal Gods to return. Consuming these worlds would allow them to become gods themselves.

[517] The Vahla and Ember of Vahl come from the *Legacy Era Campaign Guide*.

[518] The Sylek are from "La Revolte d'Acier" in *Backstab* #28-30. They're described as having committed genocide against their neighbours in a war roughly 7,000 years ago, making it a neat fit.

[519] The Force-sensitive mineral life of Nilrebmah X used to build the Monolith is from "Le facteur X" (*Casus Belli*). The Silex name is new, though the Melters/Meltmassif through which Cronal percolated his essence, are from *Luke Skywalker and the Shadows of Mindor*, and the Nihil Smokestone (used by the Rhandites in the same manner as Cronal), from *The Unknown Regions*. Too similar not to link together, this further worked due to the fact that Cronal learned how to construct Shadow Crowns of Meltmassif from the spirit of Dathka Graush.

[520] From "Korriban: Planet of Lost Souls" (Wizards of the Coast), in which pirate Naz Felyood discovers the Heart of Graush in his tomb in 1 BBY, before losing it and becoming cursed to never age until he finds it again. Cronal wore the Shadow Crown in "Gambler's World."

[521] The Battle of Corbos was a battle between Dark Jedi, Jedi Hunters, and a mysterious group of "powerful Dark Side rivals," according to *Jedi vs Sith: The Essential Guide to the Force* and *Legacy 30*. One of these rivals is the Dark Path, a seductive Sith sect involved in a seeming civil war on Dromund Kaas, from *TOR*. The concept of a "Darth lineage" is an old one, dating back to

Evil Never Dies, and there has never been a cogent explanation as to why some of the ancient Sith bore the title while others did not. Here, it is interpreted as a shadowy Darth cult that initially represented alignment with the ways of the Outer Gods and the nihilistic True Sith, in contrast to the more conservative, collectivist, and less destructive approaches of Kaan's Brotherhood, Ludo Kressh, Ajunta Pall, etc. Over time, the Dark Path would infiltrate and battle the more orthodox Sith philosophy and ultimately overtake its counterpart with the rise of Naga Sadow and the proliferation of Darths following the Great Hyperspace War.

Chapter 76: Dynasties of the Depraved

[522] "The Chronicles of Lord Skaysh" from *The Old Republic*, *Book of Sith*, and *Jedi vs Sith: The Essential Guide to the Force* all indicate there were multiple (perhaps rival) "Dark Lords of the Sith" among the Exiles, not just Ajunta Pall.

[523] While the names are original to this work, these two brothers are referenced as sibling Dark Lords who slew each other during the latter reign of Ajunta Pall, according to "The Chronicles of Lord Skaysh" from *TOR*. Since Ajunta Pall died without seeing the return of the Exiles who departed to attack the Republic, these *had* to be part of the original twelve Exiles rather than additional Dark Jedi from the Qalydon Reckoning, which explains other potential Exile candidates such as Pharshol. The reference to black armor identifies one of them as the unnamed Dark Jedi on p. 21 of *Book of Sith*; the other may be one of the three black-robed Exiles bearing red lightsabers from *The Journal of Master Gnost-Dural* (Chronicle Books), one of the two statues of lightsaber-wielding Dark Lords seen in *Empire's End*, or both. Other Dark Jedi depicted fighting in the Hundred-Year Darkness in *The Journal of Master Gnost-Dural*, the *Tales of the Jedi* comics, and other sources did not need identification as Exiles, as they were not explicitly depicted as being part of the handful of Dark Jedi who survived the Battle of Corbos. D'chira and Mote Onterr are named after friends Richard and Tom Terrone.

[524] The Qalydon Reckoning, comes from Abel G. Pena's unpublished *Vader's Legacy* and cut content from the *Knights of the Old Republic Campaign Guide*, so named because "the core of the conflict came to focus on rubicund Kaiburr crystals from the Qalydon system, which proved exquisite in primitive lightsaber construction." This was known as the Great Calamity on Kesh.

[525] The Sith prophecy was written by friend and contributor, John Vougias.

[526] This was first mentioned in *Evil Never Dies: The Sith Dynasties*, which was intended to explain how Jedi knew about the Exiles' survival and dominion over a "Sith Empire" prior to the Great Hyperspace War in the *Tales of the Jedi* comics. The conflict was further developed in the *Lost Tribe of the Sith: Spiral* comics. Here, the conflict is expanded to account for the many anachronistic references in *The Old Republic* regarding pre-Hyperspace War Sith history, such as: Tulak Hord fighting for the Sith Empire against Jedi on Yn and Chabosh as a "Sith warrior" prior to becoming Dark Lord of the Sith (with Tulak Hord's discovery of Dromund Kaas, and the references of Pharshol, Vacuus, Barel-Slathborn, and Ergast as being among its first colonists, necessarily dating them and Garatak to Hord's era); a Sith Academy and sorceress on Sigil; Terrak Morrhage developing plagues against the Jedi on Malachor III; as well as the Crucible; and Muur's talisman being lost on Taris, from the *Knights of the Old Republic* comics.

[527] The recruitment of Jedi during this conflict accounts for many early Sith Lords who did not make the cut of the twelve Exiles yet otherwise appeared to be candidates, such as Aloysius Kallig and the others listed, as well as the undead, enthroned "Jedi outcasts" from *Empire's End* and *Tales of the Jedi: Dark Lords of the Sith* (whose thrones number at least fourteen) and the Dark Jedi who were stranded alongside Dreypa on Kesh. Baka Sadow is a character original to this work to explain Naga Sadow's boasts of descending from the original Dark Jedi.

[528] While the origins of the Mecrosa Order in Sith Viscountess Mireya of Vjun circa 4,250 BBY are well-known, what was previously unknown is to what Sith lineage Mireya belonged, as well as the Sith Lords she granted tax-free holdings to on Nyssa. The origins of this lineage being a Sith survivor of the Qalydon Reckoning who settled on Vjun comes from cut content from the *Knights of the Old Republic Campaign Guide*, although the name of this individual and his role in

creating the Energy Vampire race of Countess Rajine is established here. Vassago is the name of a Goetic demon from the demonological grimoire called the *Lemegeton*.

[529] These ancient Sith spirits were seen in *Tales of the Jedi: Dark Lords of the Sith*, *Empire's End*, and Abel Peña's unpublished *Vader's Legacy*. Svelt Aller later entombed the remains of Lumiya in the throne left empty by Andeddu.

Chapter 77: Naga Sadow Meets the Materialist Magician

[530] Voodoo and Nirvana were established in the EU, the latter from *Galaxy Guide 7*; the former from *Star Wars Galaxies: Rage of the Wookiees* and *The Clone Wars* episode, "Massacre."

Chapter 78: Scions of Amnesia

[531] Danar's construction of the amulets reconciles various contradictions surrounding the two amulets whose reunion resulted in the crowning of Exar Kun and Ulic Qel-Droma as Sith Lords. *Tales of the Jedi: Dark Lords of the Sith* #6: "Jedi Assault" depicts them as a kind of magical time capsule transmitting a message across the centuries to "the future" from the "reigning Dark Lord of the Sith" (and other shades) so that the return of the Sith might be secured. This Dark Lord who rules *after* the Great Hyperspace War is of clearly Human appearance and his remains on Korriban are identified as those of one of the original Dark Jedi outcasts. Naga Sadow's opposition to this and the Sith prophecy that the Dark Lords would one day return (in the form of Exar Kun) is from *Tales of the Jedi: Dark Lords of the Sith* #4 and didn't make much sense in light of the retcon that Sadow was himself a Dark Lord. So it was retconned as a vengeful prophecy of the return of *Human* Dark Lords, in line with Danar's Dreypa-like humanocentrism.

[532] This all comes from "Le Facteur X," in *Casus Belli* #115.

[533] Meetra Surik being Nomi's daughter is from cut content from the *Knights of the Old Republic Campaign Guide*, as provided by Abel Peña.

[534] Abel Peña's concept of the "Verification," drawn from cut content in *Knights of the Old Republic Campaign Guide*, was inspired by the Amish Rumspringa. The Tundites' bizarre powers stem from the Taoist-inspired nonduality perspective of their Force analogue, the Unity.

Chapter 79: The Tragedy of Seidhkona

[535] Seidhkona and the Mind-Witches first appeared in "The Paradise Detour" newspaper strips, which featured a ruined planet and classic depiction of a wicked witch. Zeltros was first mentioned in Marvel Star Wars #73 and visited in #104.

[536] This is from the Disney ride *Captain EO,* written by George Lucas and directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Some of the species names are new here. Leria Kerlsil and the Life-Witches come from *The Corellian Trilogy*.

[537] Lord Nyax is from Corellian legend. He and Irek Ismaren (who took on his name) come from the *Enemy Lines II: Rebel Stand*.

[538] Jak'rii is a character name from top-tier contributor John Harrington.

[539] From 1978 to 1979, Chris Claremont went on to tell a saga of the winged Orovars of Barsoom in "The Master-Assassins of Mars," in issues #16-27 of Marvel's *John Carter of Mars*. That very same year, he wrote essentially same race, only now with varying skin colors, as the S'kytri, for Marvel's first Star Wars Annual. Given the various Barsoomian crossovers that already exist, it seemed fitting to tie them together.

[540] Fon J'Lynn is a Tuckerization of top-tier contributor John Flynn.

[541] *Etka Chu* is a name found on the spine of an ancient Sith book in Darth Wyyrlok's library, as seen in *Legacy* #27: *Into the Core*. The spine features the word *Lau*, which in Cantonese means "To kill," "conquer" or "overcome." The rest of the title is "Sick Life," *Et Kalcha,* "and dark" and "dreams," which may translate to *To Conquer the Life of Illness and Dark Dreams*.

Chapter 80: Vernal Tales from the Endor Moon

[542] Ragland Nowes is named after friend and Hextropedia creator Logan Andrews.

[543] The Xevious are from the video game *Xevious* (Namco, 1982), while the Gond are from *Vanguard* (SNK/Centuri, 1981). With the former designed by Masanobu Endō and themed around the Vietnam War, like the Battle of Endor, while paying direct homage to Star Wars, it seemed like a fun nod.

[544] According to "Castaways of Endor" (Hyperspace), the *Free Enterprise*, containing hundreds of Tulgah and Jindas crash-landed on the forest moon in 130 BBY. There are two problems with Morag being a Tulgah in this scenario. In the "Sunstar vs. Shadowstone" episode, Logray tells Morag that she's plagued them for 200 winters (since the Endor moon has a 402 day year of 18 hour days). That means that Morag has been a thorn in the Ewoks' side from at least 30 years before the *Free Enterprise* crashed on their moon. Another problem is that when the authors conceived the idea of Morag being part of the Tulgah race, they forgot that the Endorian Mandrill has the same face Morag has. This retcon resolves "Castaways" with my earlier conception.

[545] There is a cameo appearance of a Tulgah in *Star Wars Galaxies: Rage of the Wookiees* and a mention of other kindly Tulgahs in *The Complete Star Wars Encyclopedia*.

Chapter 81: Autumnal Tales of the Endor Moon

[546] The story of the Stone Beast/Monster comes from "The Ewoks Celebrate the Moon Festival," from the German *Ewoks* magazine. Simon is from *Galactic Battlegrounds*; the Megawok is from *Star Wars Galaxies*. The Kermes is from another German *Ewoks* magazine, though the name is original. The Balinaka is homage to *Boris the Bear* and his murder-spree of Ewoks in issue #1.

Chapter 82: The Kingdom of Dreams

[547] Sevend Tesrek is a Tuckerization of my friend, Derek Stevens, the first person to read and provide feedback on *Supernatural Encounters*. Pyozic Brynner is my cousin Ron Przybycien.

[548] Barrbaxes of the Jerna Clan is a Tuckerization of my two dogs.

[549] This was taken almost verbatim from the speech given by the High Lama in the Frank Capra film, *The Lost Horizon*, based on the 1933 novel by James Hilton.

[550] In homage to the Virgin Steele song, "Guardians of the Flame."

[551] Cody Sunn-Childe is the creation of comic-book scribe, J.M. DeMatthias, for Marvel *Star Wars #46*: "The Dreams of Cody Sunn-Childe." In the original version, published by Marvel UK in issue #141 of *The Empire Strikes Back* monthly, Lando appreciates Cody's pacifist stance. In the U.S., however, LFL changed the ending to have Lando rail against Cody. DeMatthias was not pleased with them "defacing" his work, surprised that they couldn't cope with even the slightest challenge to the heroes' morality. He removed his name from the issue, changing it to Wally Lombego. You can read his account here: http://www.jmdematteis.com/2010/09/dreams-of-wally-lombego.html. Lucas would later present a more nuanced approach to his heroes.

Chapter 83: In the Temple of Darkness

[552] Silri, the ancient Carbonite Sith Army, and Sith Master, come from *Empire at War: Forces of Corruption*. Attributing this to Danar and and the unnamed dead world to Nilrebmah XIII is new.

[553] The Witchling concept comes from top-tier contributor, Isaac Semmelmann: haloreacharbiter@gmail.com. Special thanks to him as well for introducing me to illustrator Guillaume Ducos.

[554] These lines pay homage to the poem, "The Shadows," by Clark Ashton Smith. In the original, they read: "He was a philosopher, from what land there was none to know or ask. Nor was there any to ask what knowledge or delight he sought in the ruined palace, with eyes always upon the moving shadows; nor what were the thoughts that moved through his mind in ghostly unison with them."

[555] The ancient tongue refers to Darth Nihilus' "unsettling, literally extirpating" language in the *Knights of the Old Republic Campaign Guide*. In *Knights of the Old Republic II,* Nihilus' speech is the language of the True Sith, with the Sith Assassins and ancient Sith Holocrons speaking the same disturbing, hissing tongue, which seems akin to Lovecraft's R'lyehian and Tolkien's Black Speech. Jedi prophesy that it will be heard in the end times when the True Sith return.

[556] Palpatine-Plagueis' ritual tainted the Force, which the Father attributed to his diminishment.

[557] This is basically an amalgamation of two very similar concepts, one from Robert. W. Chambers, "The Slayer of Souls," and one from Clark Ashton Smith's "The Infernal Star," which involve sapient and evil stars that bear influence on Mankind.

Chapter 84: The Verdict

[558] Heilan Rotham comes from *Legacy of the Force: Betrayal*.

[559] Mon Mothma speaks reverently of the Maker in *Dark Forces: Soldier for the Empire*. Religious practice was permissible in the Empire so long as it didn't interfere with Imperial rule. The implication here is that Mon Mothma's particular faith had an anti-imperial bent.

[560] A younger Leia dropped a water balloon on Tarkin's head in *Tales* #11: "The Princess Leia Diaries;" she went undercover as Lady Tarkin's handmaiden in "Princess Leia, Imperial Servant."
[561] Jakob Corrin and Bo-Jaccan's story comes from top-tier contributor Jacob Connor Fagg.
[562] This comes from the *ROTS* novelization. In the novel, Qui-Gon states: "Eternal life… the ultimate goal of the Sith, yet they can never achieve it; it comes only by the release of self, not the exaltation of self. It comes through compassion, not greed. Love is the answer to the darkness." The quote is an almost direct echo of what the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction. So when Jesus says 'love your enemies,' he is setting forth a profound and ultimately inescapable admonition. Have we not come to such an impasse in the modern world that we must love our enemies—or else? The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation." In another speech, he said, "Every person must decide at some point, whether they will walk in the light of creative altruism or in the darkness of destructive selfishness." This is the key to eternal life no matter if one is a smuggler, princess, Jedi, alien, or even a droid.

Appendices

[563] This is based on Albert Schweitzer's definition of good and evil, as espoused throughout his life's work and philosophy of Reverence for Life (see *The Philosophy of Civilization;* Macmillan). The original reads: "The essence of Goodness is: Preserve life, promote life, help life to achieve its highest destiny. The essence of Evil is: Destroy life, harm life, hamper the development of life" Indiana Jones met Schweitzer in episode 5 of S1 of the *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*.
[564] Despite only being a short piece, this Atlas update represents a labour of love comprising months of reading, researching, writing, and editing made possible by those to whom I owe a profound debt of gratitude. And while my stand-in acknowledges their contributions in-universe, I would be remiss if I did not thank them on a more personal note here. Aryn Hort Thorn, Obern Wentham, Rygel Lawlins, and Wes Adod are the in-universe Tuckerisations of my fellow *Supernatural Encounters* editors, Harry Thornton, Robert Newnham, Kyle Rawlings, and Edward Dodds, all of whom remain my close friends and deeply respected peers. Wolery Urhart and Kelmar Aryn are Tuckerisations of Arthur Lowery and Marcel Ryan, whose deep dives into the classic pulp authors who inspired space opera in general and *Supernatural Encounters* in particular proved invaluable throughout.
[565] The Charon likewise originated in *Otherspace* (WEG, 1987), with their various incursions referencing other Expanded Universe sources. Stronghold comes from *Otherspace II: Invasion* (WEG, 1989), Kayri III comes from the *Rebellion Era Sourcebook* (Wizards of the Coast, 2001), while Sanctuary (listed as Minor to avoid confusion with the Rebel safeworld) continues the rich tradition of acknowledging fanmade sources, originating in Roland Gutwein's 2009 *Otherspace III: Extinction* (accessible via Rancor Pit).
[566] First introduced in the 1987 WEG adventure of the same name, the dimension of Otherspace is clearly a known, observed, and documented phenomenon in-universe, yet the implications of this were left largely undeveloped until *Supernatural Encounters.* The field of Otherspatial physics was invented here to explain how in-universe academics would respond to the discovery of an alternate dimension, with their annoyance at being associated with Hextrophon's works playing on the longstanding real-world tensions between the hard sciences and other, softer disciplines.
[567] The concept of time travel is well-established in the Expanded Universe, with the introductory section serving to collate various sources in which it has been featured. Kinnin Vo-Shay, though technically a victim of time dilation, is from "The Last Hand" in *Star Wars Adventure Journal #13* (1997, West End Games); Bosbit Matarcher is from "225-Year old Man's Secret–Time Dilation" (*HoloNet News Vol. 531* #48); and Sam Heggs is from "Tales from Mos Eisley: Heggs' Tale" (1995, *Star Wars Galaxy Magazine #2*). Similarly, while fans of *Supernatural Encounters* have embraced the inclusion of Darth Dreadwar, it is oft-forgotten that his original appearance in

"Le Facteur X" in *Casus Belli #115* centres on characters from the Galactic Civil War-era discovering his existence by stealing a prototype time machine and accidentally ending up in the midst of the Great Sith War. The in-universe records of this incident being classified further contextualises the obscurity of both Dreadwar and time travel.

[568] Further evidence to the above comes from the civilisations on Jerne ("Dark Knight's Develry" in *The Empire Strikes Back Monthly #153*); Benja-Rihn ("The Secret of Tet-Ami" in *Star Wars Tales #13*); and Almas (with the time-warping abilities of the Darkstaff central to Wizards of the Coast's *Living Force* RPG).

[569] Axkm Garmet is a Tuckerisation of Max Tegmark, an MIT physicist, machine learning specialist, and cosmologist who has posited on the theoretical use of black holes in time travel. Since Darth Ramage was intended to be a scientific rationalist in the same vein as Darth Dreadwar, it felt fitting to name the Sith Lord's public persona after a credible academic who has touched upon time travel theories.

[570] The list of Temporal Gates – the Apeiron equivalent of Infernal Gates leading to Illathurion – is filled with Easter eggs which I leave for others to decipher. However, the reference to ground-crawlers (the Star Wars term for cars) is sure to raise a few eyebrows thanks to a particularly famous time-travelling automobile. While I have no in-principle objection to fans who enjoy crossovers wanting to include *Back to the Future* (Amblin Entertainment, 1985) somewhere in the mix, I would be remiss if I didn't note that this was intended as a reference to Edmond Hamilton's *The Time-Raider* (Weird Tales, Oct. 1927-Jan. 1928) – a four-part series which featured a car modified to serve as a time machine almost sixty years before the film!

[571] The presence of cultic followers of Darth Dreadwar residing on Dentaria builds upon a storytelling foundation established by the SE Atlas. When setting a placement for the Nilrebmah system, the only point of reference was that it was located somewhere in the Expansion Region. It made sense for Dreadwar to base himself near the Perlemian, close enough to manipulate events in both the Galactic Core and Sith Space, with the ancient Sith stronghold on Alpheridies a logical neighbour. Upon identifying those features, I noticed that Alpheridies was next to the Dentari sector, which both possessed the "-ari" suffix meaning "lord/king" in the Sith language and started with "Den" which could logically be a corruption of an original "Dan" as in Danar.

[572] At first blush, the list of worlds contained within Apeiron no doubt reads like it was all invented out of whole cloth. Yet only a small handful are original inventions, with the piece drawing heavily from *Supernatural Encounters* itself and the pulp authors that influenced space opera (inventing names when the original source material did not include any). Though not an exhaustive list, readers interested in delving further may enjoy H.P. Lovecraft's *The Music of Erich Zann* (The National Amateur, Mar. 1922); Clark Ashton Smith's *The Eternal World* (Wonder Stories, Mar. 1932), *Flight into Super-Time* (Wonder Stories, Aug. 1932), *The Dimension of Chance* (Wonder Stories, Nov. 1932), *The Plutonian Drug* (Amazing Stories, Sep. 1934), and *The Chain of Aforgomon* (Weird Tales, Dec. 1935); Edmond Hamilton's *Wacky World* (Amazing Stories, Mar. 1942) *The Inn Outside the World* (Weird Tales, Jul. 1945) and *The City at World's End* (Startling Stories, Jul. 1950); C.L. Moore's *Doorway into Time* (Famous Fantastic Mysteries, Sep. 1943); Frank Belknap Long's *The Hounds of Tindalos* (Weird Tales, Mar. 1929); and Ramsey Campbell's *The Plain of Sound* (Arkham House, 1964).

[573] The use of the term "Demiurge" to refer to these rogue Celestials is a reference to the video game *Afterlife* (LucasArts, 1996), a god simulator that puts the player in the role of one of these semi-omnipotent beings. This builds upon and provides further context to a reference in *Supernatural Encounters*, where the Maker is slandered as "but a misguided demiurge" by the Immortal Gods of the Sith. Several Easter eggs to various other LucasArts Games properties are sprinkled throughout this piece.

[574] Established as a "mirror image" version of Terra I in *Supernatural Encounters*, Apterra is not one of the nine Earthworlds but could be treated as an equivalent by fans wanting to write their

own stories or play with potential crossovers set in Apeiron. The reference to Humans on Apterra discovering time travel technology of their own was intended to enable this, without necessary implying any specific crossovers.

[575] Sidamyr Taroft is a Tuckerisation of Sid and Marty Krofft, the co-creators and producers of the original *Land of the Lost* (Krofft Pictures/CBS, 1974-77). Along with Tuckerising their names, Sidamyr Taroft was intended to evoke a magical fantasy/fairytale feel, further honouring the Krofft's body of works.

[576] Geborrose is a Tuckerisation of Jorge Borges, an Argentine short story author, essayist, and poet. A significant influence on the magical realism movement, which integrates fantastical elements into otherwise normal settings, his works evoke such fitting motifs as archives, dreams, labyrinths, mirrors, infinity, and mythology.

[577] Perdide is a reference to René Laloux's 1982 animated film, *Les Maîtres du temps* (*Time Masters*), which is based upon the novel *L'Orphelin de Perdide* (*The Orphan of Perdide*) by Pierre Pairault under the pseudonym Stefan Wui. Given that Laloux's other animated works, *Fantastic Planet* (1973) and *Gandahar* (1987), had already received references in *Supernatural Encounters*, it seemed fitting to include *Time Masters* here, with its heavy time-travel elements making for a more natural fit in Apeiron.

[578] Odju-Fyf is a Tuckerisation of Jo Duffy, a prolific writer in Marvel Comics' original *Star Wars* run. The world itself is intended to be the unnamed "technology-deficient planet" from *Star Wars 101: Far, Far Away* (Marvel Comics, 1985).

[579] Though Iarainn is an original planet, it was invented to account for another documented case of time travel in the Expanded Universe: the Sith dreadnaught *Harbinger*, which was transported from 5,000 BBY to 41 ABY in the novel *Crosscurrent* (Del Rey, 2010). This event occurs after the in-universe publication of this work, thus precluding it from being mentioned directly. The name Iarainn was intended to evoke the Jerni, who had previously sheltered Hidden Pithem. Their homeworld of Jerne translates to "iron" in several language, with "iarann" similarly meaning iron in Gaelic.

Coda

[580] This quote is taken directly from the words of Beudag the Centauress in the rare Leigh Brackett short story, "Shadows in the Woods," published in *Venus*, issue #1, 1944.

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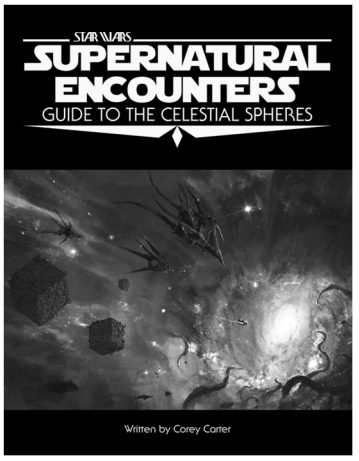

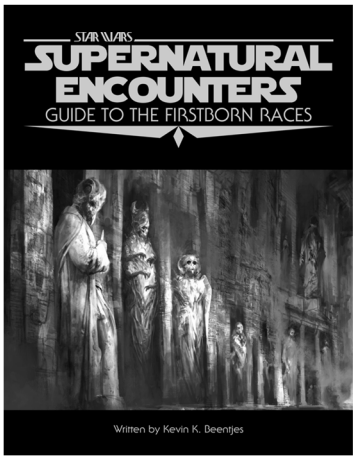

And much, much more at:

https://www.starwarstimeline.net/Expanded%20Encounters.htm

Illathurion

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"Otherspace"

The Map of Asmoth-Yor

Xothic Zone

Prison of the Dark Ones

Synestia of Tulu

Vortex of Zushakon

Ice Peaks of Avaloth

Vergama Cataclysm

Vix'ni-Aldru

Ktynga

Urthha

Vhoorl

Great Library of Celaeno

Dire Stars of the Hydras

Lake of the Fire Vampires

B'moth Route

The Desolate Harbinger

Void Horror

Sathla Spiral

The Hellgate

N'xoth

Xoth

Yuggoth

Myggoth

Tond

Canals of the Mi-go

Appith of the Seven Black Suns

Thule

Charnel Worlds

Andumnos

Nephil

The Charred Heath

Shadowed Lanth

Dúath

Orgus

Duzhak

Sthanee

Diyu

The Deep Dark

Vampire World of Karthis

Ur'lyeh

Ourane

Kar'kosa

Duodel

Sarucene

Xibabal

Sea of Sss'haa

Thasaidon's Comets

Prison of the Titans

Borderworld of Xen

The Outer Darkness

Shaggai

Xanthiir

Shadow World of Adumbrall

Tentaculum of the Profane

Curtain of the Eidolons

Valley of the Wandering Stars

Fields of the Nephilim

Burrow of the Barracle

Onanna

Yekub

Gateway of the Glooth

Matamagnus

Yaddith

Shumath-Ghun

Bridge of the Bholes

Teloe

Yilla

Lair of the Soulworms

Silan Wormhole

Syrox Sinkhole

Illyria

Hawlk Holes

Schinga Stairs

Faroe Ferry

Ring of Yig

Ghooric Zone

Esoteric Track

Mezzallmech

Iirkthoss

Yumar

Oozultharoum

The Sea of Pleasure

Oceans of Egustus

Borderlands of the Old Ones

Euvoran Maelstrom

Lagoon of the Lost and Lonely

Great Black Nest

Galaga

Nest of the Ythill Queens

Wolax

K'gilmnon

Apshaidia

Ka'jk'z

Pathway to the Dreamlands

Vapour Zone

Drukath

Void of Death

Haides

Metheus

Ocean of Othuum

Cykranor

Korridor

Forgotten Isle of Golgoroth

Tindalos

The Hidden Gate of Apothem

Somnia

Delve of the Wyrd

Vulthoom Ravine

Garden of the Lorelei

Lophai

Kkor

Ydmos

The Twilight Vigil

The Hidden Lights

Nirn

Uhluhtc

Xiccarph

Star-Seed of Kr'llyand

Cold Sovereignty

Vermes

Z'lykarior

Cauldron of Sine

Ygam

Cytharion of the Seven Suns

Yhoundeh Sector

Apeiron

The Map of Darth Ramage

Paternum
Gallusium
Fosselium
Dadaevum Cluster
Iratavium
Danvillum
Greeblum
The Temporal Mists
Jocacea
Aspereola
Stereola
The Eternity Rift
Quindecium
Time Tides
Frivoli Gate
Chronology Clock of Ap
Pollexum
Wirut
Infinite Staircase
Apterra
Katapuk
Susuum
Mohaun Los
Fortaevum
Islands of Iteration
Timeless Vigil
Legaevum
Tencton
Aeternaevum
Rauggoth
Chronos
Morta
Cephalonia
Pentiambium
Mallatum
Auseil
Gulf of S'glhuo
Odysseum
Hole of Infinity
Odju-Fyf
Sinraevum
Hashium
Sea of Generations
Geborrose
Sidamyr Taroft
Apoth
Omnaevum
Fautaevum Cluster
Iarainn
Labelle
Angled Space
Apmictlan
Graveyard of the Time Worms
Chain of Aforgomon
Hestan
Apshai
Perdide
Tindalos Gate
Thel
Janovus-α
Janovus-Ω
Faetsoro
Shiryoro
Puutakka
Justistar
Amisaevum Cluster
Apologia

The Nihil Retreat

The Map of Lord Cronal

Indix
Phandiom
Gla'aki Cl.
Pnidleethon
Ixig
Sadastor
Eldon Isolde
Tau Volantis
Hiveworld of Drukh
Drauger Pulsars
Ulgra Conurbation
Hounds of Tiyar
Caiman Worlds
Yun Kaax
Kamazot Rift
Tunorr Shipyards
Ragnar Cl.
Vultur
Kabrakan
Zapakna
Argud
Witch Worlds
Northus
Frowa
Inguin
Izamá Cl.
Sea of Serpents
Vane Stream
Esse Nebula
Compass Worlds
Óôrin
Ozanek
Cimi
Lokke's Web
Kvasidreyra
Unapu Exoplanets
Hoblin
Baka
Valtaullu Rift
Rhigull Constellation
Royal Tombworld of Kizin
Forest of the Moon
Kuk'k'ur'kan
The Tetra Hex
Ringworld of Omicron Dawn
The Indika Run
Star Forge
Void of Fomori
Eokaid
Rhand
The Marrowstar
Girgoll
Máragain
The Ensorcelled Spheres
Baylorr
Gunninga Gap
Danaan Belt
Gobannus Shipyards
Kernunus Cl.
Wastelands of Duinn
Xaczhick
Llugus
Dagda
Valtaullu Rift
Pleasure Palaces of Ongus
Valtaullu
Djall of the Damned
Hormahket Cl.
Anuit
Secret Gate of Kulsu
Anhurzhu the Empty
Fenett
Shoals of Aset
Metus
Royal Zot
Nebet-Hett
Great Ennead
Kukuth the Doomed
Ausirus
Gigas Cl.
Burning Iverti
Serpent Lands of Negebu
Ratum Prime
War World of Sethyphon
Kulshedër the Serpent World
Loch Lamiae
Serapeaum of Zakara
Silent Sea of Silenius
The Lesser Ogdoad
Horlussur
Inapus
Ithull Swarm
En-Nagaha
Blood-Bull Belt
Eye of Ammut
Desecrate Hollow

The Phantom Stars
Azratum the Angry
Hydras of Uzum
Volcarum Cl.
Ghostworld of Zimut
Zubula Fissure
The Kabir Matriarchy
Sea of Kurbant
Taautuz
Kamis the Corrupt
Chasm of Jenknell
Amunos-Magos
Shadrapa
Khuzor
Akkhazu Anomaly
Rezhef
Well of the Forsaken
Bayal Cl.
Aztar
Loch-Mot Cl.
Tinit
Dagānu
Sisters of Kotaratu
Star-Tombs of the Tempest Fathers
Yarik-sin
Dire Sacrifice Pillars
The Ezhmun
The Cthonic Clouds
Zakkun
Fated Mists of Vegoia
Gravityr
Ilithiya
The Unhallowed Ring
Norcia Wheel
Haruspex Cl.
Black Gate of Atar
Eitan
Tiniamun
Ižkur
Rath
Uni
Acherontic Zone
Luguz
Zis-nyus
Mantus
Tages
The Demonstars
Kumarma Hegemony
Uliqummi Void
Iyari the Desolate
Ḥôbabis Quasar
Great Wall of Upelluri
Territories of Tezzub
Haunted Reaches
Ḥedammu Ring
Heptad Cl.
The Wyrd of Tarhun
Zantas Prime
Borboel Triad
Illuiyanka
Necromantic Autagen
Zarruma the Roaming
Gap of Yaldaba
Kallipt the Accursed
Gnossus Cl.
Syzygy Rift
The Emenation of Protofane
Iä
Mighty Pthon
Bythos